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# ABORIGINAL SCIENCE FICTION

*Tales of the Human Kind*

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RICK SHELLEY

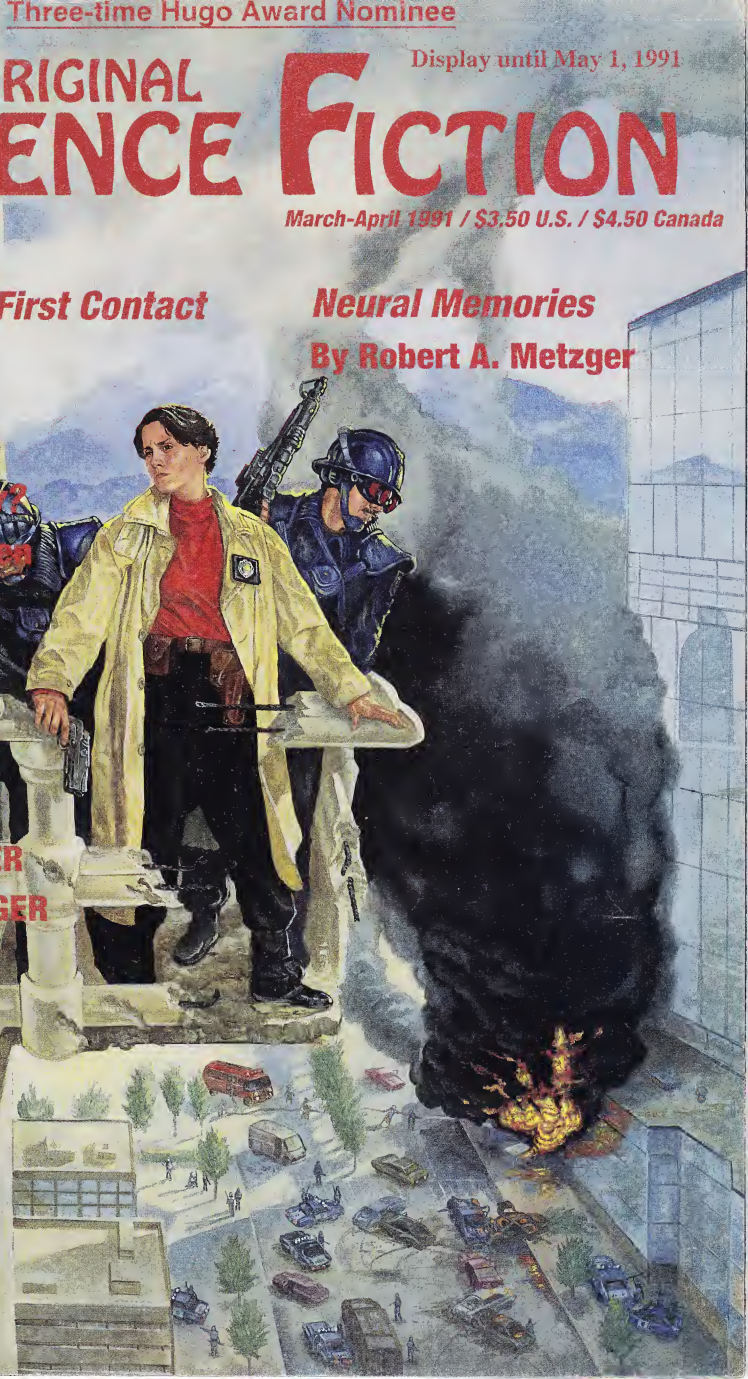
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# For Fear of Little Men

By Terry McGarry

Art by Patricia Davis

On ascension day, Bridget was the last to struggle through the bent and scarred opening into the world. Her eyes could not resolve the blur of gray and brown at first, and when she looked up she nearly fell, her eyes watering; the sky was not blue with a golden sun but flat and gray and so vast she felt it must crush her. She sat down and then lay flat, pressing into the floor — the ground, she must remember to call it, the Irish soil — which was soft and made of grains of earth and woven strands of growing things. She heard the shouts of the others, some afraid to move away from the hatch, some running wildly about with Mr. Fitzhugh ordering them to stop; but they all sounded as if muffled through the wall hangings that decorated the nuclear-war survival capsule she and the other members of the textiles group had just emerged from, and she began to understand what distance was.

"Oh, God," her mother was crying, softly, repeatedly. She had fallen to her knees and drawn handfuls of the green growth to her damp, red face. Bridget moved closer to peer at the short-stemmed, delicate plants. "Mam?"

"The clover, Bridget. It should only have three leaves, but four was considered lucky, and Bridget, even after the blast and a century's time, it's still *here* ..."

Bridget grew uncomfortable with the unexpected emotion and turned her eyes to a row of black stumps surrounded by tufts of baby trees, recognizable though none exactly fit the videos she had seen. The air was thick with odors, sweet and acrid, and she opened her mouth to breathe as if she could unravel its components with her tongue.

After her seven years in the caps below, the last seven wakes were clearest in her mind. She clutched the leprechaun embroidery in her pocket — leprechaun, Mrs. Simmons the schoolteacher had corrected her, telling her gently that they were not real — and remembered the day in class when they had discussed the coming ascension in real terms for the first time, because the communication cap had announced that it was really going to happen. In preparation she had rehearsed to herself the forbidden words for rain and sun and sky — *baisteach, grian, spéir* — and counted in her mind the colors in the tiny rainbow thrown on the wall by her brother David's bit of angled glass, so that she would recognize the big ones when she saw them.

"My father says we don't know if it isn't all water above and no floor at all anymore, that the heat melted the ice at the top of the world and flooded our islands," David had said.

"My father said *that* was a bomb the IRA could understand," Jimmy Hanlon had put in, not to be bested in father-quoting.

The words had blurred into meaningless babble to Bridget, although she was trained to memorize instead of using limited paper and disks; when Mrs. Simmons

wasn't looking, she had slipped out a book of fairy stories and let the stuffy workroom fade away.

The next thing she had known, David was yanking the book from her hands. "Lesson's over and Jesus will you come out of that dreamworld of yours."

"Leave her," Glenn Fitzhugh had said softly. "She's just a wee wane, and you're a bully, Dai."

Bridget had followed the altercation absently, her eyes still on the yellow page. She appreciated Glenn's kindness and had been sorry when David hit him, because Glenn couldn't fight back without hurting. David had cursed her, which stung because it meant that Father did it. He had said she was unwanted, she was the third child, Mother broke the rules, Mother was a Catholic and they were bad and stupid but nobody wanted any more trouble so they pretended that Great-great-grandfather hadn't smuggled Great-great-grandmother down here, taking the Compact in bad faith, and Father pretended he wasn't sorry because everyone had to marry according to genetics and lots of times it didn't work out and no one else complained, and he worked extra hard as if it could make up for the extra mouth to feed, and the one good thing about ascension was being rid of Them ...

"You're half one if what you say is true," Glenn had said with bovine, implacable logic from the pile of cloth into which David had pushed him. David had had a tantrum then and Mrs. Simmons had come in and scolded them for not being at tea and Bridget had squeezed her leprechaun tightly and looked up from the sewing benches and fiber recyclers to the smooth gray walls and lighting tubes above, above where there wouldn't be any fighting anymore.

It's not that they're bad and we're good, Bridget." Mother had whispered later, fastening the hangings over the alcove opening and switching on the white-noise generator. Bridget associated the fuzzy hiss with the rows it was turned up loud to drown out — rows about her. "It's just that we're different; we're the ones they were trying to keep out when the capsules were made, and although most of these people are good people, and our friends, there are some who still resent us even after all this time. Hate dies hard, love." She had smoothed Bridget's hair back and braided it, deftly, gently. "Now say a Hail Mary for me."

"I'd rather say a poem. I read it in a book about the fairies. 'Up the airy mountain, down the rushy glen, we daren't go a-hunting, for fear of little —'"

"You and the fairies. You're as bad as my mother was. Still, it's our tradition, and if we don't preserve it no one will."

"We're the last, aren't we, Mam?" Bridget had said





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quietly, the poem forgotten.

"Ah, now, Bridget, I don't know that. We're the last in this cap, anyway."

"And David and Anne? Glenn said ..."

"Glenn's a good lad but he doesn't know everything. No, I was young when David and Anne were born, I let the Compact have them. I was afraid they'd do to me what they did to your grandmother when they found out she was teaching me the old ways. You're our last chance, Bridget. That's why I had you and that's why you must remember the words and prayers."

"I'm afraid, Mam."

Her mother had made a clucking sound. "What can they do, with ascension so soon? The whole cap knows about us anyway, and there's bad feeling about what was done to your grandmother." She had paused, and swallowed.

"Do you think ... above ..." Bridget had wanted to ask about the fairies, but her mother had misunderstood her.

"No one knows, *mo chroí*. But I'll tell you what I think. Our people were left up there to die by those with the money and the industry to build the caps. But our people are survivors, Bridget, and I believe they're still there. I believe they took back the land that was theirs when all the Orangemen hid under it, and that they —"

"You'd best lower your voice before the whole cap hears and lynches you after all." Father's voice had preceded him through the heavy cloth over the alcove door. Bridget had glanced at her mother's tight face and scurried past him to the outer chamber, where David and Anne were breathing softly in their dreams. The thirdsleep tape of a thunderstorm had looped just audibly between their cots. Bridget had crawled in next to Anne and thought how learning that water didn't always come from synthtanks but fell from above in little drops that made the sound on the tape was not quite the same as learning that Mother and Father hated each other. But she had learned them at the same time, and they were both just things to know. It was all right. She knew about leprechauns, too.

Bridget remembered how long the next six wakes had seemed to stretch before her. And now, miraculously, here they were ...

Then she saw the leprechaun. At first she thought it was one of the other children who had wandered off, but it was an odd shape and didn't walk properly. It seemed to sense her stare and, with a wild look, disappeared.

Mam had gone off to talk to Mrs. Simmons; Bridget made sure she wasn't paying attention and began to run toward the trees. She had never run on ground before; it was harder than the treadmill, and her short legs carried her as haltingly as her tongue pronounced the old words. By the time she reached the trees there was no sign of the small creature. Her heart fell, but she remembered that they were shy and decided to sit on a stone and wait. She was far enough into the woods to feel concealed from Mam and the rest, though it was hard to know what could be seen from far away. It was chilly here, but in a new way; she realized that the air was blowing against her with water in it, not quite rain but a fine dampness, and she raised her face and closed her eyes and smiled into the breeze.

She sensed its presence almost before she heard the crackle of its steps, and opened her eyes slowly, holding her breath against her beating heart. It was dirty, and no

taller than she was, and she knew at once that it was a leprechaun because they were the worst-looking fairies.

"Fear," the creature said.

The sound startled Bridget, so little had she expected him to speak. She frowned. "No, I'm not afraid."

He shook his head at her, so vehemently that his matted hair swung back and forth. "Neel, iss fear may."

Bridget, no more confused by this than she often was by Mrs. Simmons, memorized the sounds and then tried to fit them to English. "Are you afraid? Don't be afraid —" She reached out to him and he nodded vigorously.

"Fear, fear," he said, pointing to himself and smiling. He certainly looked unafraid, although his awful teeth succeeded in scaring Bridget. Then he pointed to her. "Colleen."

"My name is Bridget," she said. He didn't seem to understand, so she pointed to herself and repeated her name until his rheumy eyes widened and he grinned.

"Bridget!" he said, delighted. Then, pointing once more to himself, he said, "Shay!"

He jumped up and down with obvious glee and then sat and pointed systematically to everything around them. She understood that he was naming things, but the sounds made less and less sense, and Bridget had stopped trying to mentally catalogue when he pointed up and said, "Spare."

Her heart jumped as if he had uttered an obscenity, and she automatically looked around for eavesdroppers. Then she stared at him. "*Spéir*," she said, pointing up. He nodded, encouraged, and held his hand at her head (it was so filthy and crooked she flinched) and then high above it. "Colleen. Ban. Colleen anish. Ban amawruck."

"*Cailín*," she repeated slowly. "Girl."

"Colleen."

"Fear," she said, pointing to him, and as he nodded she visualized the Irish spelling in her mind. "*Fear!* Man! You're trying to say you're a man in the old language! Oh, but you say it so oddly. *Is fear tú! Is cailín mé!*"

He laughed, a hacking sound that would have frightened her had she not been so pleased, and she began to laugh herself, the movements of the muscles unfamiliar in her stomach, so long had it been.

Shay and Bridget sat laughing among the black stumps of the old forest, repeating the shared words until the rain came.

She met Shay regularly the next few wakes — days, she learned to call them, just as she learned to accept the coming and going of light without switches. It was easy to slip away; the task of erecting shelters was heavy and hurried, and she was told to keep out from underfoot.

In the beginning they shared vocabulary, since she knew only a few full phrases. After a while they were able to carry on a simple conversation, while munching on berries and strolling through the sparse woods. His Irish was distorted, with distorted English mixed in, and all of it was garbled by his queer crooked mouth, but it was easier to learn than Mam's because with Shay she could speak aloud and often.

She did not tell her mother about Shay; she was not only jealous of her secret but afraid. She had asked if there were others like him; nodding, Shay had explained that

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A crazy alien

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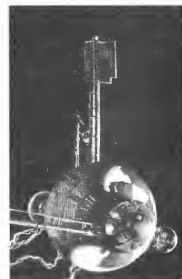
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# To Whom Shall I Tell My Sorrow?

By Joyce K. Jensen

Art by Pat Morrissey

*Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.*  
— Santayana

It's not too late to back out, Mr. Hart," the technician said. "Recording memories isn't easy. The process can dredge up things that are too painful to deal with." He rolled a beta-electrode back and forth between his thumb and forefinger. "We don't want to cause you more pain. You've already suffered enough."

"They told me it wouldn't hurt," Hart said.

"Not physically, no. But the process can be a vivid reminder of what you lost. It's still experimental; we have to record as much as we can, otherwise it might not work."

Hart looked down at his hands; he was a solid, homely man who carried his grief like a weight. The technician knew those shadows under his eyes — they all came in with them. Moments like these were hard for the tech; after all, he had children, too.

Hart looked up. "He can't die, can he? I don't want that monster to die."

"No, he won't die."

"I want to do it, then. It's not just Missy. It's all those other girls, too." He blinked back tears. "All those other little girls." He looked the tech in the eye with the rock-steady gaze of a man who works hard, pays his taxes, loves his family. "What have the others decided?"

"They've all agreed. Except Mrs. Yung. She chose not to participate on the advice of her psychiatrist."

"I see," Hart said. After a pause he added, "I'm ready now. Can we start?"

Brian and Lisa Hart had opted for one child in this overcrowded world. They planned Lisa's pregnancy carefully, arranging for a little girl with blue eyes and red hair. When they touched champagne glasses across her bassinets, she made a soft sound in her sleep; Brian ran his palm gently over her halo of red hair. "I love you, Melissa," he said. "I love you, Missy."

Under the electrodes, the memories emerged with startling clarity. He felt her baby arms around his neck; he relived her first wet kiss. For sixteen years it was Brian-and-Missy-and-Lisa, connected by hands and love. They shopped together, went to the movies, walked downtown. When it snowed they scrunched through the drifts. At nine Missy took up the violin; the notes, filtered through Brian and Lisa's love, unfolded pure and clear.

Her grades were pretty good; she liked to go to the mall with friends. At twelve, when her parents wouldn't let her date, she sulked and scribbled furiously in her diary. But that, too, passed, and through it all her parents thought her the most beautiful creature imaginable.

Life wasn't perfect, but they had each other. Jobs were demanding. The rent went up. Tabbycat ran away. But Missy, her good nature shining through, was finding her way to adulthood. They began talking about colleges.

One night when Brian got home at six, his usual hour, he found a note on the refrigerator: "Daddy — went to Jenny's. Home by seven." At seven-thirty he called Jenny's. No answer. The girls must be on their way over together; he set out another plate.

At eight he tried Jenny's again. "Missy left about six-thirty, Mr. Hart," she said. "I can't imagine where she is."

He called her friends, every one of them, got the numbers of other kids and called them too. He called Lisa and got her out of a meeting.

He called the police.

Five months passed in a gray fog. Brian couldn't eat: when Lisa started staying later and later at the office, he sometimes drank too much. Drifting apart, they sought a counselor, sat week after week in her office afraid they would lose each other, too, in the heat of this endless, horrible crisis. The call came one night as Brian was preparing dinner. A farmer had found remains. They were checking dental records. Could Mr. and Mrs. Hart come downtown to identify the personal effects?

The technician waited for the sedative to take effect on Leon Baron before dismissing the guard. Baron chuckled as his mind grew pleasantly sluggish. Then he realized his hands were still shackled to his waist.

"Hey!" he yelled, holding them up. But the guard shook her head and left. Baron allowed the rage to show, pleased that they were still afraid of him. Their fear gave him power; he wasn't particularly big or strong, but he knew what made people afraid.

The tech began attaching the electrodes; Baron jerked his head away. "This isn't going to hurt, is it? My lawyer promised it wouldn't; that's why I agreed to be your guinea pig."

"No pain," the tech growled, tugging at Baron's hair.

Baron was growing mellow. "I'm looking forward to this." He closed his eyes, letting the drug carry him inside. Memories were important to him, very, very important. They had sustained him through a lonely life, through months in a solitary cell — memories of the things he had wanted and simply taken. People were fools, not tough enough or smart enough to stop him. They thought this was punishment, but in fact he had his recompense, the satisfaction that nothing was safe from Leon Baron, not even the secret recesses of the mind.

He'd jumped at the chance to take part in this experiment. The alternative, after all, was intensive, difficult therapy, and a lifetime of drugs that would not enhance his pleasure but inhibit it. Memories were what he craved; given the opportunity, he'd gone after them voraciously.

"Hey," he said, words slurring, "who's it going to be?"

"What?"

"Who's about to enter my consciousness?"





PAT MORRISSEY ©

"Melissa Hart." The tech turned away, refusing more talk.

Leon Baron remembered. A sweet little piece, long skinny legs. Missy with the big blue eyes — oh, how she had screamed and screamed. He felt himself becoming aroused, smiled at the flush of pleasure. Missy Hart. Forever.

"Ready," the tech said.

There was a click. The room dimmed.

Leon Baron screamed and screamed, but the technician didn't come back. He couldn't reach the electrodes to pull them out; he thrashed, too drugged to climb over the sides of the couch. Baron floundered among emotions he had never known, remembered things he had never experienced. Tears ran down his temples and into his ears as Missy Hart took his hand, looked at him with love and whispered, "Oh, Daddy, thank you for the kitten. Can I keep her?"

Forever.

A practical, decent man, Brian Hart grieved and went on. Days he prepared statistics for a research firm, as he always had; evenings he went home. A careful observer might have noticed that his burly shoulders were stooped a little more, his step a trifle heavier. But eventually the hand of time spread the pain out in even strokes so that it could be borne, mercifully, in smaller doses. It became encapsulated, a foreign object which the body walls off but which never entirely goes away.

A few years later he lost Lisa in a traffic accident. Once more he grieved, wept, went on. Brian went to dinner with friends, volunteered at the downtown shelter for the homeless and at a mental hospital; he spent holidays with Lisa's cousins, for he had no relatives of his own. But nothing seemed quite real anymore.

One morning he looked in the mirror and saw the passage of time stamped on his features. The bristly eyebrows were gray, the wiry hair thinning, the heavy shoulders offset by a paunch. Retirement scared him. He was grateful to have a job to go to; the routine offered a link with the past. He dreaded giving it up.

The psychiatric hospital, St. Anne's, lay several miles outside the city. With so few untreatable patients left, it was now nearly empty. Brian volunteered there on the second Tuesday of each month, then stayed to have dinner with Dr. Rimors, the director. There were few visitors; like Brian, she enjoyed the companionship, although they had little in common beyond a need to alleviate the loneliness.

It was a warm spring evening, and they ate on the dining room patio. The garden, nestled between the main building and the residence which still housed patients, had a genteel, otherworldly air. It seemed immune to life's banalities. Two dozen new patients were grouped around the patio tables. There were guards with them.

"I see you have some new wards," Brian said.

"Yes," Dr. Rimors replied. "Prisoners. The state sent them over for observation. They're no longer considered dangerous. We're to confirm or deny that."

She was a tall, thin woman, around forty, with prominent bones, pale hair, and light eyes. With her waxen features and white lab coat, she seemed almost a personification of St. Anne, whose marble statue, arms

outstretched in mercy, beckoned from the far end of the garden.

"Actually, they haven't been a danger to anybody for a long time," she continued. "Remember, years ago, when they tried memory transfer as a punishment for first-degree murder? They're the prisoners from that program, the ones still living, that is. It wasn't successful."

Brian felt his mouth go dry. Time seemed frozen, so still and inviolate that the clouds refused to move, the leaves stopped swaying. At last he brought himself to say, "I remember. Wasn't it halted by the ACLU?" He and Lisa had not followed the details in the press; it had been too painful, at a time when they were trying to get on with their lives.

"Yes." She buttered a roll calmly, as if her words were not of great importance. "The ACLU argued that loss of personality was cruel and unusual punishment."

"Loss of personality?"

"Yes. The technology isn't reliable, not nearly so reliable as was first hoped. And the government overdid the memory transfer aspect. Because every brain is organized differently, recorded memories seem vague, jumbled, disjointed, even after many repetitions. And five or six sets of memories can be overpowering. These people actually *remember* very little. What they experience is a bedlam of unconnected thoughts and feelings that aren't really their own.

"Our memories aren't etched in stone," she went on. "We constantly reshape, rebuild, synthesize them. We use them to compare the past and the present, to make judgments based on experience. Those in turn are altered by new experience. Most of these people weren't capable of sound judgment before the memory transfers. They had what you might call pathological personalities, caused by brain abnormalities, psychological trauma, injury, drug abuse. Now they are, simply, in chronic states of bewilderment. Their thoughts, memories, ideas are unreconcilable — there's too much to sort out or make sense of, not enough referents. You can see that in their eyes."

Too much to make sense of. Precisely the way Brian felt now. There were so many things he wanted to ask, but he needed time to sort through his own bewilderment first. After he left he thought of nothing except Dr. Rimors's words; backwards and inward they led him to Missy and Lisa. He could see now that sharing his memories, which had been the most difficult decision of his life, had been for nothing. What had convinced him to do it was Leon Baron's face. The man's eyes were more reptilian than human; his icy stare sent ripples of fear through everyone around him. Had Baron been punished? Perhaps. If he existed no more, if he was lost in a hopeless morass of other people's memories, that might be punishment enough.

But it wasn't. Brian knew it wasn't. That was not what he'd intended when he'd recorded the memories dearest to his heart. He'd intended to make Leon Baron feel remorse. For the rest of his life.

These thoughts stirred up the dormant pain, and a restless yearning overtook Brian's soul. He'd thought he had put all that behind him, had come to terms with his losses. But they returned to trouble his sleep, to haunt the empty corners of his apartment and climb in the car with him every morning like a presence.

Now whenever he was at St. Anne's, his eyes kept





shifting to the door, watching for Baron. Perhaps, as Dr. Rimors had said, memories aren't etched in stone, but for Hart the memory of those reptilian eyes was immutable. Everything about Baron had been average — average height, average build, average features. Everything except the eyes. Brian was certain that he would recognize them if he saw them again.

As he drove up the highway to St. Anne's the following month, he was determined to ask Dr. Rimors about Baron. But when the time came he couldn't bring himself to do it. What would he say when she asked why he wanted to know? "I remember his name from the papers," or, "I knew him once years ago"? No, to have to explain it all, to have to unwrap the cocoon of his grief after so long, was unendurable. Still he could not let the past rest. One night he found himself kneeling on the floor of a closet searching for the picture albums, which had become the focus of a fierce dichotomy: he could neither leave them buried with the rest of his memories, nor could he open their pages. In the end he simply held them in his hands, his heart filled with a great aching loneliness.

On the patio at St. Anne's, Hart waited for Dr. Rimors. Patients, guards, attendants ambled outside with their dinner trays, drifted around him, settled at tables. He found himself staring earnestly into faces that were growing familiar, though each remained the face of a stranger. Unable to bear it any longer, he began to look into one face after the other and ask, "Do you know Leon Baron?" Some people shook their heads, others ignored him. A woman hurried past, too bewildered to reply. A man stopped, mouthed the words "Leon Baron," looked around as if he might actually know the man. But his eyes clouded over, and he, too, moved away.

Brian began pushing his way among the tables, repeating, "Do you know Leon Baron?" With each shake of a head, each blank stare, each muttered unintelligible response, he became more frantic in his drive to know.

"Mr. Hart? Brian?"

He turned to stare at Dr. Rimors.

"Is something wrong?"

"No, no, I thought I saw someone I knew, that's all." He understood, again, that he couldn't share the picture albums, which had been lying in the trunk of his car for days, with Dr. Rimors. With anyone.

"I've got a new admission, and I'll be a little while," she said. "Do you mind waiting?"

"Of course not. Take your time."

Unable to find the courage to enter, again, that sea of blank faces, he moved to a table away from the others. Baron was probably dead. As if sensing his despair, one of the patients drifted over. Staring at Hart with a puzzled expression, he pointed toward one of the chairs.

"Yes. Sure. Sit," Brian said.

The man sat down, eyes averted timidly. "Did Dr. ... Dr. ..."

Brian waited as the other searched for the word. "Dr. Rimors," he offered finally, finding the struggle too painful to watch.

"Yes, yes, Dr. Rimors," the man said. "Did Dr. Rimors say your name was Brian?"

"Yes."

He brightened. "That's my name, too. Brian!"

Hart was drawn by his childlike innocence. "What's

your last name, Brian?"

He looked first confused, then unhappy. "It's ... it's ...." Near tears, he shouted angrily, "I DON'T KNOW." But his mood quickly shifted again. "I'm sorry. I don't remember my last name. Some kind of treatment I had for my illness."

Dr. Rimors appeared behind the man's chair. "That's all right. Don't worry, it will come back to you." She motioned to an attendant, who led the patient to another table; she sat down. "See what I mean about these people, how ravaged their minds are? On the other hand, perhaps in some sense the memory transfer did work. There hasn't been a single incidence of violence among these prisoners in all their years of incarceration. We're thinking about placing them back in the community, in group homes."

Hart shook his head, thinking that justice was a travesty. Baron might not be alive, but undoubtedly there were others like him in that group. He shivered. "People like that should never be allowed back into the world."

Hoping it would help exorcise the ghost of Leon Baron, Hart began to visit St. Anne's every week to volunteer time with the memory transfer patients. He enjoyed the company of the patient Brian, who now referred to himself as Smith, though whether that was really his name Hart wasn't sure. They played cards or board games or simply chatted, much as Hart did at the shelter for the homeless. There was something about the quiet garden, about the great need Smith and the others had and how much they appreciated his company, that alleviated his own loneliness.

Today he and Smith carried the backgammon board out to a bench, with St. Anne in her marble robes looking on benignly. But during their second game Smith suddenly underwent one of his transformations. One moment playing for fun, the next he attacked the board with fierce concentration, as if competing for high stakes. When he missed an obvious move, he hissed, "Damn!" and flung out an arm to sweep the board off the bench. Hart cringed backwards. Smith stopped his arm in midair, got up, and paced back and forth until he had control again.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"That's okay." Hart sensed that Smith had learned such self-control only with great effort, yet at the core of his personality there seemed to lie a decent and compassionate man. Hart wondered, not for the first time, what crime Smith had committed to bring such dire punishment upon himself.

As they walked back toward the main building they passed an old man kneeling beside a neglected flower bed. He looked up at them imploringly. "Is it spring or fall?" he asked. "Is it time to plant or harvest?"

"Neither," Smith replied kindly. He helped the man to his feet, supported him as they walked back to the hospital. "It's summer. The seeds that were planted are growing."

On his way out, Hart stopped by Dr. Rimors's office. "I'd like to take Smith to the shelter with me soon," he said. "Do you think he's ready?"

She was delighted. "He's the most ready of all that group." She looked at him closely. "You'll be responsible for him, you know."

"I know."



Although it was Smith who had been released from walls and fences for the first time in years, Hart felt as if he himself had been set free. Smith was calmer and more relaxed now, beginning to rediscover bits of his past. Like Hart, he had a background in statistics and seemed to have had a family once, though whenever they got close to that subject, Smith became agitated and distraught. Perhaps his family had abandoned him after his conviction. Hart carefully avoided bringing it up.

The shelter was located in an abandoned inner-city supermarket, the big open spaces partitioned off in cubicles. They pulled into the parking lot after dark. When they opened the trunk for the groceries — donations from neighbors, who were always dropping by Hart's apartment with something — Smith spotted the albums. "Pictures," he said delightedly. "What are they?"

"Nothing," Hart grunted, having finally decided that the past was best forgotten. He thought of packing the albums away again, but if he did they would continue to fester like a sore. Tonight after he took Smith back to the hospital he would burn them, cauterize the wound.

"Can I see?"

"No," Hart snapped, then added more kindly, "They're worthless images from the past. The present is what counts. Let's go inside and see what we can do."

Because the weather was good, the shelter was nearly empty. Only five or six children watched the vid in the lounge area. Hart always did what he could to make the children's stays more pleasant. He bought toys, read books, introduced them to the shelter's cats, Tom and Tillie. Staying at the shelter took its greatest toll on teenagers, who felt humiliated by the experience, so it wasn't surprising to see a girl of about twelve sprawled across a chair away from the others. She was flipping through an old fashion magazine. Beneath her ragged hair and clothes tension sharpened every angle of her body. "We'll show her the kittens," Hart whispered, as much to himself as to Smith.

"Kittens?" Smith said.

They carried the food into the kitchen. "They're in the back hall by the pantry. We can look at them later. Start unpacking this stuff. I'll let the director know we're here."

But when he came back, Smith was gone. Hart checked the hallway and the pantry. "Brian, Brian," he called. He hadn't left Smith alone for five minutes. Where could he have gone? He made a hurried search of the building, but Smith was nowhere to be found, not in the store rooms or the restrooms or the empty cubicles. He went to find the director. "I can't imagine where he got to," he said.

She laid down her pencil. "You think he's dangerous?"

"No, not dangerous." He doubted his own words even as he said them. "I would never have brought him here if I thought he was dangerous." Never, never, never.

They went to ask the residents if anyone had seen him. The children shook their heads, went back to their vid. The two men in the men's section were lost in their own woes; one shook his head, rolled over on the cot, covered his head with a saggy pillow. The other wiped rheumy eyes and rocked from side to side, humming mournfully to himself. No, he hadn't seen anyone.

Hart stood in the makeshift hallway, uneasiness radiating outward from his heart. The vid chattered inanely in the background, the walls creaked and groaned under the weight of years.

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"I saw him, mister," said a voice. It was a small woman, no more than thirty. She stood self-consciously upright, as if certain that a better life lay ahead. "He had one of those kittens and was talking to my girl, Lizzie, over by the pop machine."

Lizzie. The twelve-year-old? Anxiety crawled down the insides of Brian's arms. "Let's go ask Lizzie if she knows where he went."

But Lizzie was gone, too, her half-finished bottle of soda abandoned, her tattered magazine tossed aside. Brian, the director, and Lizzie's mother continued searching. A dark foreboding began to nag at him as they combed the half-empty building: the storage rooms; the damp, unused basement where Tom and Tillie hunted mice; even the dumpsters at the back of the parking lot.

With each new failure to find Smith or the girl, Brian's understanding grew, and with it fear. It was suddenly shockingly apparent that everything about Smith had been too much of a coincidence — even the same name, the same background in statistics. When he understood, finally, whose memories dominated Smith's consciousness, Brian ran into the director's office and dialed St. Anne's, his hands shaking.

It seemed like hours before Dr. Rimors answered her page. At last her image appeared. "Hello, Mr. Hart. Is anything wrong?"

"Brian Smith has disappeared," he said as calmly as he could. "Tell me — do you know his real name?"

"No, he's not under my direct care. Let me find out." There was a pause; it stretched on and on while Hart prayed that he was wrong.

At last she returned to the phone and said the words he dreaded, the ones that he had known, deep in his bones, were inevitable. "His name is Leon Baron."

Nothing existed beyond the frantic pounding of his heart. How could he have been so blind? Dr. Rimors's image stared back at him quizzically. "Brian? Mr. Hart?"

He hung up and for the second time in his life called the police. A girl was missing; a St. Anne's patient, possibly dangerous, had disappeared, too. They sent out the call but he couldn't stand and wait. Not this time.

The director appeared in the doorway. "Has anyone tried the roof?" she said.

Hart rushed past her, ran in his lumbering step through the kitchen, past the pantry and the cat's bed where the kittens mewled and tumbled, down the dark hall and up the stairs.

Leon Baron sat crouched outside the door, hugging his knees and weeping, rocking back and forth. Hart shook him roughly. "Where is she?" he demanded, hearing the edge of hysteria creeping into his voice. "Where's Lizzie?"

Baron continued rocking and weeping. "She's gone, gone, gone. My little girl's gone." He hugged his knees tighter, bent his face against them to sob. "Missy, Missy, Missy."

Desperately afraid, Hart hurried out onto the dark roof, trying to distinguish among the shapes of the mechanical equipment in the dark. "Lizzie?" he said, running randomly across the tarpaper, hoping against hope. "LIZZIE!"

A little voice answered petulantly, "What?" She stood up from behind an air conditioning unit.

Hart rushed to her, squeezed her thin arms as if he would never let go. "Did that man hurt you?" His brain

flooded with relief; his voice had gone to a whisper and his knees were near collapsing. "Are you all right?"

"He didn't do anything but give me this kitten," she said. "Her name is Tabbycat." She paused. "I never had a kitten before."

On the drive back to St. Anne's, Brian shared his grief. Brian Hart's grief. Leon Baron's grief. For the first time since Lisa's death, he had someone he could talk to, someone he could understand and be understood by. He walked Baron up to his room, the picture albums clutched tightly in his arms. □

## A Month of Sundays

By Geoffrey A. Landis

*In worlds where trips in time are less exciting  
Than to the beach, or trips to Buffalo  
A month of Sundays means just that exactly  
You watch the sunrise any time you feel  
Have picnics just on days of sunny weather  
And walk the dog the times you want to go*

*In time, when time machines are just as common  
as dishwashers, or cable video,  
Science is a quaint and useless notion  
It's all been done: you only look it up  
There are no mysteries left, and no surprises  
And people only die by growing old*

*In a world where doors may open to next Tuesday,  
And through your window breeze blows from last fall  
War is obsolete; no one fights battles  
When tomorrow's paper tells who won  
They typeset books straight from the printed copy  
And no one even writes them first at all*

*Where is means was, and was means also will be  
Last week is just another place to go  
People never ever say "if only"  
If they have things to change, they just do so  
You don't ask daisies if she does love you truly  
They never tell: and, anyway, you know.*

# Guns or Butter



One billion dollars, in thousand-dollar bills, makes a stack just a little taller than the Sears Tower in Chicago. That doesn't mean much on our planet, of course. Let me give you a clearer picture. Chicago is about the same size as Fizzbang (although it is located on a lake shore rather than a thermal fissure). Sears is Earth's largest retailer. A dollar is equal to approximately two gortrans. The Sears Tower is as tall as 1,400 flesnets standing one on top of the other. That ought to give you a graphic representation of how much a billion dollars is.

It is also the amount that human beings in the United States spend annually on injuries resulting from the use of firearms. The figure includes hospital expenses, doctors' fees, ambulance services, follow-up care, and rehabilitation.

After injuries, the bill for murders due to firearms is more modest — something on the order of \$33 million (figuring funerals at an average of \$3,000). So, leaving aside the costs of manufacturing and distributing the firearms, as well as that of ammunition, the annual bill for civilian armament comes to \$1,033,000,000. That doesn't count lost work time and productivity. (Often, you have to stay home from work for a day or two after you've been shot.)

Human economists have a special way of looking at this expenditure. They call it the guns-and-butter problem. At current retail prices, for ex-

ample, the amount spent by American human beings cleaning up after their firearms users is enough to provide everyone in the country with an extra four and a half pounds of butter a year. (That's at supermarket prices. It would be considerably less if they bought the butter in convenience stores.)

The annual firearm cost is large and growing. To a great extent, it's a pretty simple equation. More guns equals more shooting. More shooting equals more bullet wounds. It's pretty much a statistical proposition, really.

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*The explanation is  
that human beings  
just don't like butter  
enough.*

---

Why human beings are increasingly driven to make holes in each other is the subject of intense debate on this planet. Some observers attribute it to the 18,000 simulated murders the average human being has witnessed on television before he leaves high school. Some say it comes from the ever-widening income gap between the social classes, especially in urban areas. Then there are those who attribute it to the breakdown of the family, the illegal drug business, the fifty-five mile-per-hour

speed limit, or the inadequacy of established religion. There are other explanations, most of them even more muddle-headed than these.

These creatures are not giving sufficient study to the work of their own economists. The explanation is that human beings just don't like butter enough.

Tell a human being he can have an extra four and a half pounds of butter a year and he is unimpressed. Some of them like butter once in a while, on toast or with a baked potato, but for the most part, four and a half pounds of butter is just four and a half pounds of butter. If it were potato chips, that might be a different story. But it's not. It's just butter. Who cares? Who has time to go to the supermarket to buy the stuff? It takes much longer to buy a pound of butter at the supermarket than it takes to buy a firearm at a gun store. They have very little free time these days, so they spend it purchasing guns instead of butter.

On the other hand, the \$1,033,000,000 they spend on recovering from the use of firearms is the equivalent of more than 103 million home-delivered pizzas. Telling them that might get their attention, but I doubt it would change their behavior.

There is probably not enough pepperoni in the universe to tempt them away from the delight of making holes in themselves and each other. □



# Only a Game

By Rick Shelley

Art by Lori Deitrick

I was hunting, so I didn't go out until 23 hours. The roof lights gave a hazy sort of overall glow to the street. Neon signs over the bars, strip joints, and arcades fought for attention with an insane kaleidoscope of flashing colors and the grating of electronic pimps hawking for business. Music was white noise in the background, coming from dozens of competing loudspeakers. The strip on Rush Street was a vampire, coming to life while most of the city slept.

My first stop was Darro's, a crowded drinking joint that featured nude dancers. I ordered a beer and sat at the far end of the bar, not a good seat for watching the show. That was okay. I didn't give a damn about the show.

"You lookin' for action?" The voice was throaty and low. I turned and saw haunted eyes trying to hide behind glow-in-the-dark make-up, enough paint to fill in early wrinkles.

"What kind of action?"

"You pay your money and you take your pick," she said. In the crazy lighting, her skin was a sick color. Glitter in her black hair reflected all of the neon flickers in the bar.

"Not tonight, love," I said, keeping it friendly. "I'll buy you a drink if you're thirsty, though."

"I get no spread on that."

"Then you'll get real booze, not colored water, right?"

She looked around. Nobody had entered the bar since I had. She must have already propositioned everyone else. "Thanks. I could use a drink."

She ordered Canadian Club on the rocks and hoisted her glass my way in toast when it came. I returned the gesture and we both went back to watching the crowd. When I finished my beer and started to get up, she asked, "What are you looking for? Or who?"

"Biteback," I said. Her eyes opened wide. Boredom gave way to something approaching fear.

"Ain't none of that around here." She looked around as if she feared someone would overhear. "Ain't been none of that in a couple years." Her eyes flicked toward the goiter of the Enhancer on the nape of my neck. "You got money. What you need with pain?"

"There's no pain if you're the best." I smiled, then held out both hands. "Not a scar to be seen," I said, a little too tightly. She stared at my hands — smooth, tanned, without a trace of trembling.

"Come on, Mister. Hands like that, you gotta be virgin, far as biteback goes."

I shook my head slowly. "Been playing since they were legal." The look in her eyes told me that she believed me. Not that it mattered, but I was telling the truth — if not all of it.

"It's only a game," I said before I left.

Only a game. I stopped on a bright patch of sidewalk to look at my hands again. I made fists and relaxed them. Not a scar or callus anywhere. Perfect hands — just

a little numb.

Biteback, more formally "full-feedback gaming," had been an instant rage when the games companies introduced it. *THE ULTIMATE ELECTRONIC GAME! THE CHALLENGE OF A LIFETIME! WHEN YOU THINK YOU'RE THE BEST!* There were dozens of models. Most had you fighting with blades, fighting against blades — or against teeth and claws. If you were perfect, you'd finish the game and pull your arm out of the control sleeve without a scratch. If you were less than perfect, each mistake was met with the cut of a razor, calibrated against the severity of the error. Three or four major goofs and you could come out of the sleeve almost needing a transfusion.

People stood in line to play.

Psychology students earned Ph.D.s for studying why people became so thoroughly and quickly addicted to biteback. Maybe somewhere buried in all of the technical gobbledegook someone actually has come up with *The Answer*, but I haven't seen it yet.

I walked north along the strip. People moved aside to give me room. The hyenas always recognize a lion.

A cop car came around the corner behind me, its electric motor inaudible in the blare of the street music. I glanced toward the car, casually, to let the two cops inside know that I didn't have anything to hide. I didn't see the camera, but I knew it was there, stealing my image so the crime-control computers could check me out. I wasn't worried. Unless somebody had muffed his job badly, the triple-C net would come up empty. The squad car pulled ahead slowly, waiting for word to come back on the photo. Then the cops speeded up to look for new possibilities. I smiled at the receding tail lights.

In the six long blocks of the strip there were only seven game parlors left. I remember when there were 20, each flaunting three or four biteback machines as their main attractions, filling the rest of their floor space with sensaria and older machines to give gamers something to do while they waited for their turn to challenge a biteback. And to give people who didn't have the nerve for the big time something to do while they watched the elite in the biteback shells. We were heroes of a sort. The spectator types looked at us as if we were larger than life. A lot of us looked at ourselves that way too.

Gameroom rules were fairly standard. When your turn came, you were only assured of one game. Hit a certain score and you could get one more game — and you paid for it. One more. One more. Until your cumulative mistakes reached another level and you had lost your quota of blood. Then you were done. If you could get through three or four games and emerge with little or no blood on your hands and forearms, the drugstore cowboys sitting







around would let their mouths drop open in amazement and you took another step from mere mortal to gamer god.

Rashad's was the Palace of biteback during its brief heyday. Now I could hardly tell that it was the same place. The parlor had aged. The games and gamers were fewer. I walked the line of machines, partly to kill time until I could make a contact, partly hoping to find something to rekindle the old lust, the drive to challenge a new beast and tie it in knots its creator never dreamed possible. But Rashad's was down to eight machines. They were all full-spectrum sensaria, but not the newest, not the best. I watched the kids in a couple of modules. They were wild about the games, but they were too young to have known biteback while it was legal. Ten years back, they would have just been starting school.

Game parlors still hurt me, but it's a different kind of pain. Pale imitations kindle memories of the real thing too easily, even though you can't get cut by the new games. But I don't stay away. I can't. I lowered my head and left Rashad's, walking quickly, as if some contamination might soil me forever. I headed for the nearest tavern. I needed a drink to flush out disappointed nostalgia.

Fiona Kelly's was new, and a pleasant surprise. It didn't bother with bright lights, loud music, or any of the usual strip frills. It was a quiet place, decked out like an old Irish pub, complete with dart board and a lot of green. The barmaid was young and attractive.

"Whatever you have on draft," I said. There was plenty of room at the bar. I sat on the middle stool of five empties and leaned against the padded edge of the bar.

"You look like somebody dropped a load of bricks on your head and then made you pay for them," the barmaid said when she set a mug of dark ale in front of me.

I pulled a pair of Suzies out and flipped them on the bar. One spun for a moment before it ran out of steam. That's another sign of a hard-core gamer — aluminum dollars, always change in your pocket, ready for the next machine.

"Nostalgia ain't what it used to be." I don't particularly care for ale, but I drank a third of it in one long pull. The barmaid took one of the coins but didn't race to the cash register. Instead, she cocked her head to the side and stared at me. I took a shorter second drink and met her stare.

"What kind of nostalgia?" she asked.

"Games, something you probably don't remember."

"You kidding? We get salesmen in every week wanting to put machines in here."

"Don't tell me you're Fiona."

"I am here. We're a chain. I manage this shop. But my real name is Ellen."

"Well, Fiona-Ellen, I bet they don't peddle the games I'm talking about."

She stared some more, but there was a different look on her face. She transferred her stare to my hands, then reached across the bar and took my hands in hers. Her fingers slid over my hands, up to the wrists. When it looked as if she was ready to take my pulse, I pulled my hands away.

"Maybe you do remember." I finished my drink.

"You got bit bad, didn't you?" she asked softly.

"You could say that. I'm still looking for a chance to bite back."

"You're at the wrong end of the strip. I shouldn't say

even that much. You look like another game is the last thing you need."

"Maybe, but I'm going to keep looking. I have to."

"I know." Her voice went flat. "But I won't help you."

I stood. "If there's a game around, I'll find it."

"I know that too," she said, a little sadly.

It was after midnight when I left Fiona Kelly's. I kept moving north, slowly, promenading. The blast of competing music faded into the background. Part of that's natural. Part comes from my Enhancer, selecting certain frequencies to mute. The Enhancer does a lot. It provides extra memory and computing power, aids the senses in range and delicacy, speeds the reflexes . . . and gives me a lifeline in case of catastrophe. If I'd had one back in the early biteback days, I might never have been cut. An Enhancer is no guarantee. It wouldn't turn a stooge-flipper into a biteback pro. But I was already good without it.

The strip had too many bars now. I stopped in most of them, never buying more than one drink, rarely finishing any of them. That's something else an Enhancer helps with, keeping alcohol from building up in the bloodstream. You can still get drunk with an Enhancer, but you have to work harder. In the old days, I wouldn't have drunk anything when I was looking for biteback.

I started seeing people with biteback scars on their wrists and forearms — some worn as badges of honor, some peeking through inadequate attempts to disguise them.

Finally, I got to Dossman's. I was in there the night the Hooded Cobras came in to rob the bar. Old man Dossman blew away four of them with an Uzi that hadn't been fired in 50 years. Then the gun blew up in his face. The remaining snakes ran. In one of my crazier moments, I grabbed one gang member as he ran past me and threw him through the front window. Bad luck for him. Somehow, a long shard of glass severed his carotid artery. He was dead before he slid to a stop.

That was while biteback was still legal. I was so hooked on the games that it was weeks before the fact that I had killed someone soaked through my skull. I met that Hooded Cobra the way I would have met a bad guy in a game. Dossman's reaction was the same kind of thing. He wasn't an addict like me, but he did play the machine in the back room of his bar occasionally.

Biteback debuted without advance notice on August first. Within a week, legislators all over the country were moving to outlaw it. Local governments, mostly health officials, tried to rule biteback out of existence without waiting for Congress or the various state legislatures. So did the Surgeon General. The game companies had their lawyers waiting, though. Every attempt to ban biteback was met in court and tied up in fancy knots. Biteback injuries, so the companies claimed, were insignificant compared to injuries in professional and collegiate sports. Nobody had died from biteback. The blades were sterilized before each cut to make sure that no diseases could be transmitted. And so forth. But by March 15 of the next year, the machines were legally dead.

Six and a half months.

Dossman's brought back a lot of memories. I took a seat at the end of the bar, in the shadows. Most of the traffic went on through to the back room. Dossman's

sons were running nude women's wrestling, back where the biteback shell used to be. That was amateur night. If either of the younger Dossmans was in, he was in back with the wrestlers. The bartender was an old guy, but not familiar.

"We got wrestling in back, right up to dawn," he reminded me when I got a second beer. Dossman's was too much like home for me to leave after one drink.

"Too tame," I said. "I haven't been back there since they pulled the biteback machine ten years ago."

"You like to watch that?" The old man lifted an eyebrow.

"Only while I waited for my turn. I still miss it."

"How much?"

"How much do I need to miss it?" I set my beer down carefully.

"A gold dime might buy you a good clue."

"Good enough to get me to a game?" I reached into my fib pocket.

"It'll get you there." His eyes followed my hand. I pulled out the ten-dollar gold piece and spun it on the bar.

"You remember Gertrude's?" he asked. I nodded. "Down the alley in back. Second set of stairs. Tell the wino you're lookin' for a shave." I nodded again and the bartender scooped up the coin. I finished my drink and headed for the door.

Gertrude's hadn't been Gertrude's in ages. In the biteback days, the building had already been long empty. Only a faded sign on the side had proclaimed that the place had once been Gertrude's. The building was empty — again rather than still. Something called MaGooghi's had been in there sometime in the interval. The faded Gertrude's sign had been painted over a long time back. There was street art there now, a huge mural in fading colors. Anybody new to the district would never know about Gertrude's. A safety measure, I guessed. I smiled. It was a good idea, but not *that* good.

I slipped on night glasses before I entered the alley. Most of the roof lights were out behind Gertrude's. City maintenance isn't everything it could be, but I assumed that these were intentional outages. And no matter how anxious I might be to find biteback, I wouldn't walk into a dark alley without taking precautions.

The second set of stairs was a fire escape. The wino looked passed out on the bottom step. He didn't move until I got within a couple of paces of him, and then he moved much too fast for a sot.

"I'm looking for a shave," I said as he got to his feet — wary, balanced. His breath reeked of cheap booze and he hadn't shaved in days, but he moved and talked sober. He was wearing night glasses and an Enhancer. The Enhancer certainly didn't go with the wino act.

"You're new," he said. "How'd you get here?"

"I'm old, just back. I knew where Gertrude's was. The bartender at Dossman's sent me."

"I know you?" He leaned closer.

"Could be." I took my night glasses off just long enough to let him get a better look at my face. "You around when Dossman took on the Hooded Cobras?" He nodded, just slightly. "I was in the bar that night, saw Dossman lose his face."

"Third floor, second door on the left. Knock twice. Gold dime a game."

I nodded. "Been a long time since they went for a Suzie."

The stairs trembled. I climbed slowly, wondering how much it would take to bring the whole fire escape down. That's a standard gaming complication. You have to find a way to jump to another perch before the ladder, stairway, or floor falls out from under you. But this wasn't a game and there weren't any safe perches to jump to.

I looked around for the wino's back-up while I climbed. Two men were standing in a doorway farther down the alley. One of them was whispering into a pocket talker. And there was another man up in the beams that held the alley roof — a shooter.

The third-floor fire door looked a century old on the outside, but it was a new security door. I had expected that. With four men on duty in the alley, this had to be a major operation. Biteback might not be the only action inside, even if that was all I was interested in.

There were four doors along the corridor, all new. The brass on the knobs and hinges was still shiny. I knocked twice on the second door on the left. The door opened and spilled bright light into my face. My Enhancer went to work cutting down the glare, but I needed a moment before I could see anything inside.

"You here to play?" a soft voice asked.

"That's why I came."

"You know what you're getting into?"

"I've played biteback before. I used to be the best."

"You and everybody else who comes around. Tenner a game."

The light intensity dropped. I was in a small foyer. The lights framed a second door. Beyond that was a large room with the biteback machines. My escort, a small man in a suit that was too tight to conceal the pistol under his shoulder, guided me into the game room. There were a dozen biteback shells. I wanted to whistle but didn't. I had never seen that many shells in the same room, even when they were legal. They weren't around long enough for supply to catch up with demand. These machines were all busy — that was familiar — and there were people standing around watching, waiting their turn.

I did a few quick calculations. The average biteback game lasts five minutes. People lined up and waiting. Twelve machines, twelve games an hour per machine, ten bucks a game. That worked out to \$1440 an hour. Not bad for one room. I wondered what other action was available, but I really didn't care.

Besides players and would-be players, I spotted three people who had to be on the payroll — men with guns, like my escort. Whoever ran this show had a big investment in illegal hardware. You don't let that stand around without providing security.

The machines looked like half an eggshell, providing an almost wrap-around environment. The black control sleeves would swallow your hand and forearm. I started sweating. I was keying up for the game as if those ten years hadn't existed. I might almost have been 21 years old again and one of the baddest biteback biters around.

*Don't forget what you're here for*, I warned myself. Twelve machines — biteback heaven. I walked toward one machine that didn't have anyone waiting behind the player. The model wasn't my favorite, but it would do — I was already thinking like that, ready to jump in and challenge the beast. Hell, I could watch, anyway. *The*

*King's Musketeer* was a classic, the best-seller throughout the short legal life of the sport.

I was almost to the machine when I heard a voice I remembered.

"Well, Carl Jakes. I thought you were dead."

I turned slowly. "Hello, Jim. Long time no see." Jim Kepfer was big, as big as I am. Seeing him gave me a good guess at what else might be going on in the old building, gambling and hot electronics. Those were his gigs in the old days.

"This your operation?" I asked.

He smiled and shrugged. "Where'd you blow in from?"

"Been following the ponies, mostly out east. Came back for the Arlington season. Thought I'd try to find a game. It wasn't too hard."

"Crazy rumors you hear," Jim said. "Seems I heard a long time back that one of these machines killed you."

"Yeah, crazy rumors," I said. Jim came closer. I tensed but tried to hide it. This wasn't going quite the way I planned.

"First game's on, he, for old time's sake." Jim moved close to my right side, his arm behind mine. I moved up to the machine with him. Jim hit the override button in back and shut off the guy who was playing. The player pulled his arm out of the sleeve and started bitching, ignoring the drops of blood he sprayed as he gestured angrily. Jim handed him a gold dime and told him to come back tomorrow. The player saw the meanness in Jim's eyes and quit bitching.

It looked as if I would get a game whether I wanted it or not. I decided that I could spare a few minutes. The idea of a game *was* exciting. As I started to stick my right hand in the control sleeve, Jim pushed on my elbow, jamming me into the black plastic tube. He hit the start button, and I felt the sleeve's manacle clamp down on my arm, halfway between wrist and elbow.

"Not very friendly," I said, trying to pay attention to both Jim and the machine. I had a few seconds to spare. Biteback leads off with cautions and instructions. I knew them all by heart.

"I heard another wild rumor about you, Carl." Jim's voice was as cold as a week-old corpse. "Said you turned cop to hunt down honest businessmen like me."

"Rumors everywhere," I said. Then I had to focus on the game. Well, I didn't *have* to, but as long as I was there. . . .

Three of Cardinal Richelieu's Guardsmen were running toward me, yelling for me to throw down my sword and surrender. There were more shouts in the background. I had to dispatch the first three Guardsmen before their reinforcements arrived. Failure to do so was a major error — a deep cut. But I had fought this battle hundreds of times, if not recently. I knew the repertoire of the Guardsmen, could anticipate their reactions. I put the first three down in five seconds, before the second trio arrived. They were better than the first. They would be followed by four, then by six, and the dueling field would switch from the level ground of the *bois* to broad stairways, with foes above and below and a need to make a few perfectly timed jumps to get past situations that couldn't be beaten any other way.

One other way. Cheat. I was prepared for that, too.

My Enhancer kept nagging, telling me to remember what I was there for, not to take unnecessary chances. The

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game might be rigged against me. If Jim really suspected that I was a cop, he might do a job on me. And despite the Enhancer, my reflexes weren't what they were ten years ago when I spent two or three hours a day biting the biteback shells. But I had a couple of surprises for Jim. My reflexes didn't *have* to be that sharp.

I knew something was up when I saw other customers being herded out of the room, kicked off the machines and told to come back tomorrow. Before I finished the second three Guardsmen, my Enhancer confirmed that Jim and two of his hired goons were the only people left in the room with me.

Most times, I don't get *into* the games any more, despite the constant itch. I look a place over and get out as soon as I spot the games actually operating — let others finish the job. But Jim had robbed me of that option. Now the game had me as well. I'm not talking about the clamp on my arm — that was a standard safety feature to keep players from jerking back when they were receiving a cut. The clamp kept the arm steady so the cut would remain safely metered, preventing more serious wounds. No, the game itself had me, despite the nagging of my Enhancer.

The second three Guardsmen were down. Four more were coming up fast.

"Now!" my Enhancer shouted inside my head. "While you still can."

The tone was imperative enough that I acted. I jammed my arm forward, all the way against the control end of the sleeve, fingers locked around the joy stick. I twisted my arm to the right until I felt the tab click free of the retainer ring, then I pulled out the stump. My own arms both end just below the elbows.

I turned to Jim. He was staring so hard at the stump of my right arm that he didn't notice the gun in my left hand. It's a good thing that his eyes were locked on the wrong arm. I was slow drawing my gun left-handed.

"You listen to too many rumors, Jim," I said.

"You son of a bitch." He wasn't going to make it easy, and his reflexes were pretty good, too, once he put his mind to action. He sprang at me. I could have blown his head off, but that would have been too easy, and I wasn't feeling very charitable. The other employees saw my gun before they could start anything stupid, and they kept their hands out in the open, away from their bodies. Empty. This play was just Jim's. I took out a kneecap with one shot and moved to the side to let him fall without tangling me up. I moved his goons over to machines of their own and locked their arms into the control sleeves. It wasn't quite SOP, but I was ticked.

"I'd like to say that I hate doing this to you," I told them, "but I'd be lying." I pulled their guns and tossed them across the floor while I looked down at Jim. He was conscious, trying to stop the bleeding in his leg.

"You listen to too many rumors, and not the right ones," I told him. "Yeah, I got bit bad, but I didn't die. I just got blood poisoning. Gangrene. But all I could think of was beating the machine that bit me. By the time I went down in public and they hauled me off to a hospital, all they could do was finish cutting."

"You are a cop." Jim had to squeeze the words out one at a time around the pain.

"You should know better than that. Don't believe everything you hear, not even when you get where you're going next."

I don't think he got the message, but I didn't stick around to paint him a picture. I was pushing my time as it was. I hadn't left my arm in that control sleeve just to escape the Cardinal's swordsmen. I hurried out of the game room. My Enhancer reminded me about the men in the alley, so I didn't aim for the fire escape. I went down the hall, turned a corner, and found stairs. I went up one floor and headed for the back of the building. There were windows leading out onto the roof over the alley.

Getting out almost pushed my time into tilt. I hit the roof running but wasn't 20 feet from the window when the explosive charge in my abandoned prosthesis blew. Stripping it the way I did had armed the sucker. I had never used the gimmick before, but it worked.

It *worked*. The whole back of the building bulged out, and the roof over the alley rippled like a California street in an earthquake. Afraid that the whole thing would collapse under me, I dived through a window into the building across the alley. Bricks and glass tumbled in around me, debris from Gertrude's. I got to my feet and looked around. Flames were already visible from Gertrude's. The old wood inside flared quickly.

I had hit a room that was empty except for rows of filing cabinets. A burglar alarm was ringing somewhere close. I went out into a corridor and looked for stairs, anxious to get out before anyone came to investigate the alarm. Maybe it would be written off as something caused by the fire.

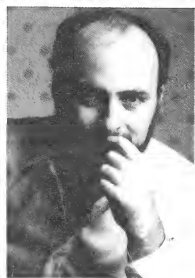
There were offices downstairs. I didn't go into any of them, didn't even notice the name on the door I broke to get out of the building. There was no one around right outside. I turned south and walked rapidly. I wanted to be as far away as possible before the fire department and local cops arrived. If I let myself get caught, I'd be on my own and hip-deep in the manure. The Surgeon General would disavow any knowledge of me. That's the way that game is played. □

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## Our Next Issue

The next issue of *Aboriginal Science Fiction* (May-June 1991) will be the special "*Interzone*" issue which will see print on two continents and contain "Darkness Upon the Face of the Deep" by Harlan Ellison, "Targets" by Lawrence Watt-Evans, "The Matter of Beaupre" by Frederik Pohl, "The Cry of a Seagull" by Lois Tilton, "Americano Hiaika" by Wil McCarthy, and "Like a Flithiss from its Shell" by Mark Clarkson and Gary Mitchell who combined their talents on an amusing tale of miscommunication. The issue will have art by Larry Blamire (twice), David Cherry, Bob Eggleton, Carol Heyer, and Robert Pasternak. And, of course, we'll have our usual columnists including Darrell Schweitzer, Janice M. Eisen, Susan Ellison, Robert A. Metzger and Laurel Lucas. What the British will make of all this when it arrives there remains to be seen.

# The Dangers of First Contact



Most of those involved in the modern search for extraterrestrial intelligence (SETI) grew up reading the works of science fiction authors like Jack Williamson, Hal Clement, and Poul Anderson. Some credit space adventure stories with arousing that first interest leading to a career in astronomy.

Scientists build and test models of the universe. So do science fiction authors. Both feel obligated to create scenarios that are at least self-consistent, and preferably plausible. Still, despite a common fascination with the possibility of contact with otherworldly life, scientists and novelists do approach the matter differently.

Scientists face restrictions seldom applied to works of imaginative fiction. Their models must be testable, for instance — against experimental evidence. And while novelists emphasize the entertainment value of their dreamscapes in order to please the public, scientists must satisfy skeptical grant committees to get funded. These committees tend to look askance on “far-out” speculations on government time and money.

For this reason, SETI researchers don't like discussing the dangers that might arise from First Contact with beings from faraway worlds. After all, such talk conjures up lurid images of pop-eyed alien invaders from 1950s movies. Hardly the stuff of serious science in the 80s and 90s.

But isn't it foolish not to at least consider all the possibilities? To ignore a potential danger just because Hollywood has sensationalized it gives Hollywood entirely too much power over our thought processes.

There may be nothing more dangerous out there in space than the wise grandparent types

predicted by Cornell SETI founders Frank Drake and Carl Sagan. Contact may be made with kindly ancient ones who want only to welcome us to their advanced, pacific civilization. On the other hand, consider our practical experience over the last 6,000 years when various human cultures have collided with each other here on Earth. The history of such “first contacts” has been anything but gentle and benign.

Oh, surely there have been some friendly encounters. Still, how many auspicious beginnings ultimately turned into calamities for one side or another? At minimum, cultural values were shaken and painful readjustments had to be made. At worst, the outcome was often genocide.

As we prepare for eventual contact with extraterrestrials, nearly every investigator talks up the optimistic side, how wonderful it would be to touch other minds. And indeed, I would be as excited as the next person. The news could lead to our salvation.

Elsewhere I have discussed the “Great Silence” — the mystery of why the cosmos is such a quiet place — emptier of living voices than many of us would have expected. This doesn't necessarily mean nobody's out there — just that they seem a trifle scarce at the moment, given our present set of assumptions.

Among possible explanations for this strange quiet are some ways our galaxy may be a dangerous place for lifeforms like ourselves. Supernovas and comet swarms and giant molecular clouds are just a few of the natural hazards little lifeworlds like our Earth may have to survive before they can bring about technological civilizations.

We may be among the few to reach this phase.

There are also *unnatural* ways the universe might turn unfriendly. For example, suppose some earlier species unleashed a wave of irresponsible colonization across the galaxy, sweeping like a prairie fire, leaving wrecked worlds and ravaged ecospheres in its wake. If such an unfortunate interstellar ecological holocaust ever happened, our Earth might be among the few lifeworlds to have escaped. That, too, could explain why we don't hear anybody out there yet.

Again I emphasize, any single explanation has a low probability of being true. Still, they are all worth some thought.

In this article, however, I want to narrow the focus down to Contact itself — to the day we finally discover we aren't truly alone. What are some of the dangers we'll need to consider on that day and during the days and months thereafter? What possibilities should we keep at the backs of our minds as we seek neighbors among the stars?

The first question has to be, will First Contact be made in person? Or will it be a mere exchange of greetings and information by radio? It's the latter scenario most SETI scholars believe in. But we'll start by considering some of the dangers that might arise if we meet alien beings face to face.

For starters, we can almost eliminate the obvious — that old chestnut of direct conquest by some alien stellar empire.

While many scientists believe various forms of interstellar travel will someday be possible, nearly all spurn the idea of armadas of enslav-

ing conquerors swooping down on us from the sky.

For one thing, why invade us now, when we can fight back? Why didn't they come during the several billion years the Earth was prime real estate but had no technological civilization to defend it?

**T**hen there are the economics of interstellar travel. Even if starflight is plausible, it's likely to remain an expensive proposition. Nobody is going to rape the Earth for its natural resources — not even uranium or platinum — when shipping costs far outweigh any conceivable benefit. (Anyway, such resources are easier to extract from comets and asteroids than from deep gravity wells like the Earth.)

Of course, invaders might not come for plunder but to colonize. But even here, most physicists and science fiction writers agree the prospect is far-fetched. "Just how do you maintain an invading army at the end of a supply line several light-years long?" one might ask. Conquerors would have to live off the land, at least until they altered Earth's biosphere to suit their needs — a difficult undertaking while they're being harried by determined guerrillas.

Invasion may be the most unlikely of dangers from outer space. But there are other, more plausible hazards that might arise from physical contact with extraterrestrials. Let's suppose a single alien starship decelerates into our solar system, say, on the folding wings of a great light-sail or behind a super-efficient antimatter engine. Presumably we would send up newcomers to say hello. Or their emissaries might come down to meet us. Let's further suppose they show no signs of weaponry and appear to be on a genuine mission of peace.

In that case, one of the most fearsome possibilities for us to worry about would be disease.

Until the recent AIDS epidemic, the concept of plague was as strange to modern westerners as extraterrestrials themselves. And yet, only a little reading of history shows that infection was always a major ingredient in first contacts between human cultures. Often it was crucial.

Anthropologist Alfred W. Crosby

points out that the European conquest of the Americas and Oceania was facilitated by such Eurasian diseases as measles and smallpox — sometimes introduced intentionally, but more often quite inadvertently, and, ironically, soon after both sides shook hands over treaties of perpetual friendship!

Some claim alien biologies would be too incompatible — that extraterrestrial parasites would be unable to prey upon human organisms and our organisms would certainly fail against our guests. But Stanley Miller, one of the premier experts on the origins of life, has a different opinion. Miller now believes biological chemistry throughout the universe involves the same small set of amino acids and nucleic bases Earth lifeforms use. Those chemicals happen to be the most stable, the best at forming the complex structures of enzymes and proteins.

In other words, it's quite conceivable the aliens' bugs could find us tasty. And ours might enjoy feeding upon them as well.

Ever since H.G. Wells, science fiction authors have warned us of this possibility. Given human history, we'd be fools not to at least bear it in mind, before that handsome alien steps down the ramp of its landing craft and offers us its hand.

Even after our extraterrestrial guests pass through quarantine, there are still some reasons to be cautious. For instance, how are we to guarantee their safety? Would you take the chance of letting alien tourists walk unguarded down the streets of any Earth city? Ninety-nine percent of the people might find them charming, and welcome them gladly. But then, most people liked John Lennon. The diversity of human beings is one of our treasures, but it also means our mad fringe will be a persistent danger to any visitors from the stars. This may be particularly hard for our alien guests to understand if they come from a homogeneous, uniform society.

**S**ome scientists, such as Stanford University's Bernard Oliver, downplay the idea of direct physical contact with aliens. Bucking the general trend, they contend that interstellar travel by living or-

ganisms is just too uneconomical ever to be practical.

But what about spaceprobes? Already the British Planetary Society has begun preliminary designs of a survey device that might be sent to Alpha Centauri within our lifetimes. More advanced civilizations would surely come up with even better plans for sophisticated machine emissaries which might even be capable of making copies of themselves as they speed onward through the galaxy, unhampered by the weight of onboard life-support systems.

It's generally thought such "Von Neumann Self-Replicating Probes" would be programmed to be friendly. But this is only an assumption. Might such probes actually turn out to be dangerous?

Could be. Physicist and Nebula-winning SF novelist Gregory Benford points out that all "self-replicating" systems — such as living things — are controlled by programs of internal information containing their design and plans for the fabrication of new copies. These plans inevitably suffer changes in time — called mutations. Life relies on mutation to drive variation and evolution. But mutation also means no species will adhere forever to its original program. The same would hold for any probe emissaries sent forth by curious aliens.

If such a probe arrived in our solar system, in what condition would its programming be?

Some of Benford's SF, and that of Fred Saberhagen and others, portrays the dread possibility of "deadly probes" — programmed to home in on new civilizations soon after they become detectable by their radio transmissions. Such horrible "berserker" machines may seem garish, even sensational, and nobody claims they are particularly likely. Still, they are in no way inconsistent with natural law. They remind us to consider just how wise it may be to shout in a jungle before we have any idea who's living out there.

**B**ut now let's put aside talk of physical contact between ourselves and extraterrestrials and concentrate on what most scholars consider a far more likely eventuality — communication with

other worlds solely via radio or light waves, exchanging only information.

Nothing exchanged except information? Surely no harm can come to either side from such an encounter!

Actually, we shouldn't be so certain about that. One has only to look again at the history of first contact between human cultures to see how much pain sometimes comes about not from conquest or disease, but when one civilization encountered another's ideas.

What mistakes await us when we encounter someone out there with something to say to us?

One is the possibility that someone may manage to slap a TOP SECRET classification on the discovery just as soon as it is made and sequester the knowledge of contact for the benefit of some group or nation here on Earth.

In fact, we cannot know for sure that this hasn't already happened! Just because an idea has been worked to death in bad "sci-fi" movies doesn't mean it's completely impossible in real life. America's National Security Agency is just one group already possessing far more sophisticated listening apparatus than the NASA SETI teams.

The chief argument against this paranoid scenario is simply that the intelligence community seems neutral—even mildly supportive—toward NASA SETI, implying they're not worried about any of their secrets being uncovered by those civilian astronomers. Still, it's worth considering what the consequences might be if extraterrestrial life were first discovered not by SETI but by one of the security agencies or by the intelligence of a foreign power.

One could imagine how information from the stars might be used in unfortunate ways if access were restricted to a narrow group. At the very minimum, it would deprive the rest of us of a startling and wonderful experience that we, as taxpayers, paid for. Clearly, from the success of many popular science fiction "contact" films, our people feel positively toward the search for otherworldly life and would resent being coddled or cut off from full participation in such a monumental event.

Many SETI scholars do worry

about this possibility, and a consensus is spreading among them that information about alien life is nobody's "property" — save, perhaps, all of humanity.

Sequestration of information is a clear danger to be guarded against. But now I want to turn around and warn about the opposite trend: the growing assumption that everything about First Contact should automatically and unquestionably be released right away into the direct spotlight of mass media. This extreme, too, could cause severe problems.

Take, for instance, the way the press turns some events into "media circuses." During the early phases of a discovery — while scientists are still trying to verify that it's "con-

tact," and not some fluke or natural phenomenon — premature media attention could do great harm. What if a mistake was made? How many false alarms can the program survive before it risks being turned into a laughingstock?

For this reason, we must expect some caution while responsible researchers triple-check their data and discreetly seek verification from colleagues around the world.

Also, we must remember that these researchers are people, with families and obligations. Their employers — NASA, for instance — may have operational rules for their SETI search — internal procedures the scientists are expected to follow before any public announcement is made. It would be unfair to shout

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"cover-up!" just because a little bureaucratic paperwork delays the big press conference by a few days.

This may mean the first announcement won't be made by responsible, careful scientists, but by someone on the periphery, perhaps someone in the rumor loop, someone with an appetite for headlines. Those who grab the front pages may not be the ones most qualified or deserving to represent us during the critical stages of First Contact.

Let's take the matter further. Say contact has been verified to the best of our scientists' abilities. Miraculously, nobody leaked prematurely or tried to steal their thunder. They've cross-checked, fulfilled their institutional requirements, and are now ready to release the good news.

Might there be some justification for putting off the announcement for just a little longer?

We should recall that it is only very recently that a few cultures began subscribing to the notion of free exchange of ideas. Throughout history, nearly every tribe or nation held instead to the more traditional notion — that there are some concepts that are simply too dangerous to be let loose among common folk.

Were all those cultures entirely wrong to believe this? I happen to believe they were. I hold to my culture's tenet, that openness is good, and the only way to protect people from bad ideas is to let them experience the entire range of human concepts, so they can learn to judge the wheat from the chaff for themselves.

But, then, I might be wrong. My culture's assumption might be wrong. Others may be right when they say ideas can be dangerous.

In his famous book *The Selfish Gene*, Oxford scientist Richard Dawkins makes this idea of "infectious information" look startlingly plausible. He coins a word, "meme," to stand for an idea that catches the attention of a person hearing or reading it and intrigues that person enough to make him or her actually want to tell someone else about it. And *she* then passes it on to someone else. And so on.

Actually, it sounds very much like what goes on every day as people talk to other people about

what interests them. It also sounds very much like the way we catch and pass on the common cold!

Dawkins makes the interesting case that "memes" behave very much like our "genes." In other words, successful information replicates (makes copies of itself), whether via the coding mechanisms in a cell's DNA or via the connected words communicating an idea. Dawkins points to how eager we sometimes are to persuade others to share our opinions, and to the tenacity with which some people fight to hold onto their beliefs.

This is not the place to go into Dawkins's fascinating idea in detail. (Though you'll notice I've already "infected" you with the concept of "memes." In some of you it will take root, you'll go look it up, and tell others. So it is with all interesting ideas, whether they're true or not.)

Still, we are led to speculate about several rather chilling and dangerous scenarios that could come about the day after information about First Contact is finally announced.

**F**or instance, what will news of contact do to people?

Some suggest it will inevitably lead to mass hysteria — even riots and suicide — as paranoia and xenophobia take hold.

On the other hand, many SETI scholars take the opposite view, that news of contact will make us all pause and reflect, in awe and humility, on the heights we can aspire to, once we put our petty Earthly struggles into perspective.

(Should contact be made by natives of my homeland — California — the first question asked of the visitors would probably be: "Say, gentlebeings, have you got any new cuisine?")

Most likely, we'll see every possible reaction under the sun. Panic and calm, mysticism and reason, hope and despair. Each combination will mirror the heart of a different human being or a different segment of the population. This may or may not be dangerous, but it certainly does promise "interesting" times soon after the announcement is made.

What if an ambiguous message from the stars seems to verify or

validate the cherished belief-meme of some group on Earth? For instance, imagine that, after transcription of the messages, a star-and-crescent symbol appears repeatedly on our alien correspondents' interstellar letterhead, and this is taken by some to mean that the aliens are Muslims? Or that some E.T. name happens to translate similarly to a central mythical figure of an obscure Christian sect? If two-way communication takes decades, even centuries, it may be hard to ask our new friends to clarify their meaning in time to make a difference in the resulting confusion.

This is serious. Once upon a time, wars were fought over differing interpretations of even a single line or word of scripture. These days we like to think such pettiness is behind us. But then, we also thought that *plague* was an obsolete word, until recently.

Before we make contact, we ought to be prepared for the likelihood that individuals and groups on Earth will seek any advantage they can from the first messages from the stars, whatever form those messages take.

Which brings up the inevitable question: How do we decide who will speak for us?

Will every nation, sect, and religious group begin casting its own pleadings, threats, and dogmas skyward, almost the instant contact is announced? Probably. One thing our alien friends are certain to learn about us right away is just how undisciplined a species we are.

But that's only the truth, after all.

Let's return again to the topic of *dangerous ideas*. How about those wonders of technology we hope to acquire once we begin learning under the remote tutelage of our wise, beneficent predecessors? There has been talk of how many of the problems dogging us — energy crises, for instance, and safe transportation — might have been solved long ago by others out there. They might even know answers to biological and sociological quandaries that today threaten our very survival.

That's the possible good news. What is the potential for bad? Are there *technologies* we're not ready

for? And is there information that *in itself* might prove harmful?

The former danger is easier to see. What if, for instance, there were a simple way to make antimatter using only common household materials and wall current? Ninety-nine percent of the population might behave responsibly and refrain from blowing us up. However, the remaining one percent would suffice to kill us all.

A SETI manager — who would take great care to quarantine actual visitors against physical infection — is likely to be very uncomfortable with the proposition that *data* might need to be checked out in much the same way. Still, can a case be made for putting a *buffer* between the main SETI receiving facility and the rest of the world, so both time and geography will give us a chance to pause and evaluate each part of the message before committing ourselves irrevocably?

Many westerners believe in the free competition of ideas — letting the fittest survive in open argument. We tend — quite rightly — to see any attempt to restrict that openness as a direct threat. Yet, there may be ways, quite conceivable ways, in which information from the stars could prove harmful. Here is just one example.

There's a lot of talk these days about so-called "virus" programs — computer codes that, once released into a mainframe or microcomputer, proceed to gobble up memory space, consume data, and eventually cause complete system breakdown. They can be likened to an infectious form of "software cancer."

So far, most virus programs have proved fairly primitive — nothing compared to the voracious, computer-eating monsters depicted in some science fiction stories. Yet, those stories *were* correct in predicting virus programs in the first place. And viruses are getting more sophisticated all the time.

A software-virus "invader" needn't even be intentional. On Earth there are endless stories of programs interfering destructively with other programs. What, then, of a sophisticated code from an alien culture, taken in through our antennas and suddenly introduced into a data-handling system for which it wasn't designed?

Any message from the stars is likely to include error-correction modules designed to repair damage done to that message during transit through the dust and plasma of interstellar space. Once the code is embedded in an active computing medium, such modules would "wake up" — much like a hibernating animal aroused from sleep — and begin using available computing resources to restore the integrity and function of the message.

As bizarre as this concept may sound, it isn't science fiction. Far from it. This is how the world's best information specialists say they would design any complex code *they* would beam to the stars!

Under normal circumstances, an extraterrestrial message might be completely harmless. But what's "normal" for alien software? There is no guarantee such a program wouldn't inadvertently take over more of an unfamiliar host system than anyone ever imagined.

This accident might be made even worse if the program suffered "mutation" in transit. Faulty reading of the original instructions could result in even more dangerous behavior.

**T**oday, SETI scientists worry far more about lurid headlines ("...SCHOLARS THINK E.T. PROGRAMS MIGHT EAT US!!...") than about infection by self-replicating alien software. And they are right. After all, nobody believes virus codes really represent a high-probability hazard to us or our civilization. But the wrong type of publicity, even misquoted, is the surest way to see SETI's appropriation slashed. With that far more imminent danger always looming nearby, it's no wonder that talk of potential hazards from First Contact rates far down most researchers' list of priorities.

And yet, is it wise to go into this enterprise simply *assuming* there's no danger at all? That's called "success-based planning," and it was used extensively by the U.S. space shuttle program. I need say no more.

Consider the Intermediate Contact Scenario — in which those we encounter by radio are too far away to meet physically, but near enough that two-way communication is a

practical possibility. By this I mean that some human might cast forth a question and expect that she or he, or her or his grandchild, will someday be able to listen for a reply.

Let's assume that scholars are right, and that First Contact will be made with an older, utterly benign civilization, completely uninterested in harming us in any way. Furthermore, say they loose no dreaded plagues upon us, either physical or informational, and none of the ideas or technology we receive from them is beyond our ability or wisdom to handle.

Assume further that competing powers on Earth *don't* conspire to withhold bits of the message for their own advantage, nor vie with each other to influence our faraway friends. Let's say we manage to appoint a proper committee to speak for Earth while, at the same time, allowance is made for the melange of other human voices that will inevitably cast forth outside all official channels.

("It's often that way with bright, impatient young species," the Ancient Ones might say. "We'll negotiate with your committee and happily set up cosmic pen-pals for the rest of you.")

Finally, let's assume the news that we aren't alone affects us in all the *right* ways, causing us to reflect on our lives and to grow closer, deeper in our understanding of ourselves and the universe.

This is the Classical Contact Scenario, a glowing prospect that many consider the most likely result of verified discovery of extraterrestrials.

Actually, I agree. It is the most likely result — one of many reasons why I support SETI, enthusiastically.

But now, making every one of those blithe assumptions, can we relax at last? Are we ready to enjoy and celebrate First Contact in complete safety?

We certainly are not!

Even in a civilized setting, life can still be dangerous if you don't know the rules. (Don't believe me? Try investing in Wall Street without any experience!)

What, after all, is the most common peaceful enterprise of human beings? Commerce, of course. And what is likely to be the main com-

modity — perhaps the only commodity — of commerce on an interstellar scale?

Again, it will almost certainly be *information*.

Not the malign, dangerous information we spoke of earlier, but *useful* information — neat inventions and brilliant innovations and even — *especially* — art and literature — anything novel and original, whatever's fresh and new.

What do you think would be our response if the first thing we're asked by aliens is, "Send us your music and your art"?

The Voyager spacecraft carry disk recordings of samples of Earth culture, along with graphic instructions on how to read the information. In the spirit of the United Nations, it simply never occurred to any of the people planning this gesture that the album should have carried a *price tag* as well.

It's all very well to speak of *altruism*, and of the joys of free exchange. But we should always remember that this is a very recent concept in human affairs. *Quid pro quo* is a more venerable theme. Throughout human history, in most of our daily lives, and even among the higher animals, the *real* rule for civilized relations is not "be generous." Rather, it is "be fair."

Arguments over what is "fair" pay the mortgages of many a lawyer.

Nice as they may be, our extraterrestrials will almost certainly engage in trade. And their stock in trade will be information. We may seek from them the answers to our ultimate questions. They, in turn, may reply, "Great. We've got some answers. But surely you have something to offer in exchange?"

All we may have to offer might be *ourselves* — our art, our music, our books and drama. Forget physical resources. The true treasures of humanity make up our culture. That is what we have to trade. It is our treasure.

It is also the very first thing we are likely to beam to the stars, in gigabytes, within days after First Contact! Given the spirit of the times, and our ecstatic enthusiasm for contact, it's what would seem only natural as we eagerly seek to "share with" (or impress) our newfound neighbors.

And that very admirable rush to share might turn out to be the worst mistake of all time.

They may be nice. They may operate under rules we would call fair. But nobody expects to have to pay for a free gift! It may be that history will speak of no worse traitors to humanity than those who, with all the best intentions, cast to the skies our very heritage, asking nothing in return and thereby impoverishing us all.

**T**his essay has been, I admit, a lot of fun to write. Of course it was done largely to amuse and entertain, and should be taken with more than a few grains of salt! I personally don't expect Contact in my lifetime. When it does happen, I predict our grandchildren will be a whole lot wiser and be far better able to deal with it than you or I.

Anyway, the scholars may be right that we have nothing to fear from that eventual encounter with wise beings from the stars.

Still, the history of contact among humans here on Earth is a litany of

cautionary tales. We are, all of us, descended — only a few generations back — from folk who suffered horribly because they weren't ready for the new challenges brought on by new vices, new technologies, new diseases, new ideas, new opportunities, new people.

In this article I've touched on some of the dangers conceived by various gloomy thinkers and writers over the years. But a complete listing isn't necessary. What's important is the *lesson*, one of circumspection and caution.

The worst mistake of first contact, made throughout history by individuals on both sides of every new encounter, has been the unfortunate human habit of *making assumptions*. It is a mistake that's often proven horribly fatal.

It's a mistake we *still* make all the time in dealing with each other today.

Let's hope it's a mistake we, or our grandchildren, manage not to repeat when and if the time comes to meet and greet beings from the stars. □

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## Mrs. Shelley, Mr. Aldiss, and the Thing Without A Name



**B**oo. It's shortly after Halloween that I write this, and for the occasion the Philadelphia Science Fiction Society's book-discussion group did *Frankenstein*. Not the movie, not the Classics Illustrated comic book, but the real, original novel.

I go to these sessions. There aren't enough people in fandom who actually talk about *books*, as opposed to, say, fan politics, video-collecting, Chinese food, how much money you can get for Stephen King first editions this week, and other important topics. Book-talk should be supported.

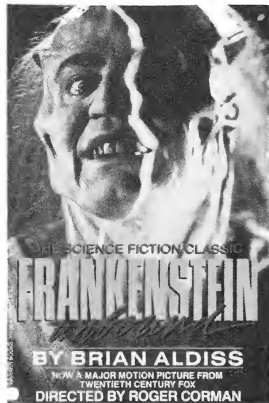
Besides, we reviewers lead restricted lives, with very little time for "unscheduled" reading, and the opportunity to squeeze something worthwhile in is always welcomed. (But the *real* survival skill is turning anything we read into the next column as deadlines loom.)

Up to this point, I had never actually read *Frankenstein*. I wonder how many of you have. I knew the broad outline of the plot — as opposed to the plots of various movies — from, yes, I admit it, the Classics Illustrated comic-book version which I read as a child (and still have), so I knew that the climax does not come in a burning windmill but in the arctic wastes and that no demented hunchback assistants or hordes of peasants with torches are to be found anywhere near the genuine article.

But no secondary version gives any idea of the richness of the actual novel, which I think you all should go read at once, in the original 1818 text.

(Mary Shelley's husband meddled with later printings.)

The first surprise you'll find is that it's enormously readable, written in an only mildly lush (and often quite beautiful) style. Shelley is *vastly* easier to get through than most early 19th-century English writers. The idiom, of course, is not our own, and readers with no historical perspective at all may have difficulty, but if you



employ the same skills you'd use to read Poe or William Morris, you'll be fine.

This should be obvious — Brilliant! Schweitzer discovers fire. Can the wheel be far behind? — but *Frankenstein* has for decades gathered dust on the shelf of works admired but not read. It's time it was taken off.

The next surprise is that it isn't a horror novel, but clearly, as Brian Aldiss has so often pointed out (in *Billion* and later *Trillion-Year Spree*), the first genuine science fiction novel. True, it evolved from the Gothic and follows some Gothic conventions; the characters are romantic types and

given to long, poetic speeches, and the narrative is in letter/diary/tale-told-to-another form. You can see a line of development stretching from Shakespeare to *Paradise Lost* to *Melmoth* to *The Wanderer* to *Moby-Dick*, and *Frankenstein* partakes of that, but the novel is best thought of as the first sea creature which has crawled up onto the land, developed lungs, and started to walk. It still has scales and even fins, but it is definitely something new.

The key to it all is that *Frankenstein* is a novel of *science* rather than of the supernatural — and science no more tenuous than the science in most modern SF. I can't think of many modern science-fictional androids created any more plausibly, save that in the 20th century we know that great inventions usually come from teams of inventors or numerous inventors in a variety of fields working toward a converging goal rather than a solo genius like Frankenstein (or Tom Swift or Richard Seaton) who masters as many disciplines as needed and does it all himself.

What matters is that the novel never steps beyond what purports to be natural law — the possible, the universe which may be manipulated by men without assistance from the Beyond. This is *the* crucial break from the Gothic. For all the horror movies rumble on about "there are things man was not meant to know," there is no God in Mary Shelley's universe ready to smite the overreacher. Instead, Victor Frankenstein's failure is one of responsibility. He rejects his creation, and on purely aesthetic grounds at that — because it is ugly, as if, during the months he labored over its construction, he did not already know that. Unlike Colin Clive's

### Rating System

★★★★★	Outstanding
★★★★	Very Good
★★★	Good
★★	Fair
★	Poor



grinning madman in the Karloff movie ("It's alive! It's alive!"), Shelley's Frankenstein is not a mad doctor at all, neither mad nor a doctor, but a well-meaning medical student in his early twenties, who is then far too emotional to deal with what he has wrought. He is a Romantic type, Romantic literature of the day having just rediscovered emotion after a century of arid Reason.

What, I asked a friend, would have happened if Frankenstein had been level-headed and free of prejudice, and had welcomed his creation and done his best to educate it? ("The book would have turned into *I, Robot*," was the answer.)

But *I, Robot* isn't what Mrs. Shelley wrote, of course. Instead she gave us a great archetype, the outcast superman who is malevolent because he is miserable, who plays Satan to Frankenstein's God. (Sure enough, the monster educates itself by reading three books, one of which is *Paradise Lost*.) I half-jokingly think of it as an early 19th-century Roger Zelazny novel, *The Isle of the Dead* perhaps, filled with epic battles and grand posturings. Sure there are flaws, even a few logic-lapses, as when Victor retires to a remote island to make a second, female creature, with no apparent source of raw material — what did he do, stuff body parts in his luggage? — but they are never central to the book, nor debilitating.

So read it and think about it and recognize *Frankenstein* as our first, slightly fishy ancestor. (Edition read: University of California Press, 1984. Illustrated by Barry Moser. Afterword by Joyce Carol Oates. After much searching, this is the finest edition of *Frankenstein* I have ever found.)

While we are on the subject, let us consider a recent reissue:

*Frankenstein Unbound*

By Brian Aldiss  
Warner, 1990  
157 pp., \$4.95

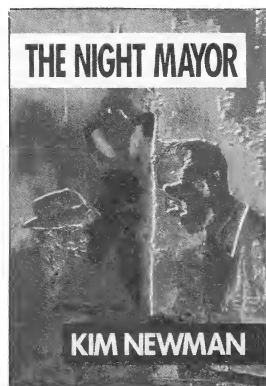
This is a tie-in to the Roger Corman movie adaptation, which got good reviews in Philadelphia at least, then played in one obscure theater for about three days. Watch for it on video. It may be worth seeking out. As soon as I track it down, I'll report on it in my movie column in *Quantum*.

But we are talking about books

here. This is an unadorned re-issue. The cover shows that the movie's monster may well be the ugliest in a long line, and Victor may have had a point after all. It's good to have this novel back in print, for all the price seems steep for a 157-page book.

I read it in the Jonathan Cape edition seventeen years ago with no first-hand knowledge of the Shelley novel, which gave me a skewed perspective, to be sure. Re-reading, I find that I didn't remember very much, and, of course, coming upon this immediately after reading Shelley provides a wholly different experience.

*Frankenstein Unbound* is one of the best SF novels about SF ever done. The premise is, admittedly, arbitrary: Nuclear wars in space have so



damaged the fabric of reality that our 21st century hero accidentally slips back to 1816, where he meets both Mary Shelley and her circle, and Victor Frankenstein, the monster, and the rest. Mary apparently exists in a different reality from the characters in her story. Only our hero can see them both. No explanation is given. Our hero also writes (or speaks into a tape-recorder) in a curiously 19th-century style, even before he goes back in time, and no explanation is given for that either. (And he hires a boat to cross a lake before he has acquired any 19th-century money. What does he pay the boatman with?)

But never mind. The book is a dialogue with Mary Shelley and a commentary on her thematics, its core occurring in a letter the 21st-century man writes to Mary, discussing the benefits and shortcomings of science, and how, for all its nuclear wars, the

future saw considerable improvement precisely because of science. Victor Frankenstein's failure is, indeed, one of responsibility rather than of the inherent evil of what he does. If there is no God to be blasphemed against, why is the creation of artificial life wrong? The answer must be that it isn't, unless you treat it as Frankenstein did.

Nevertheless, our hero winds up hunting down the monster himself, taking on Frankenstein's task. The ending is one of the great ambiguous endings in SF: a piece of the remote future has obliterated much of 19th-century Switzerland. The hero chases the monster and its mate across frozen wastes, to a vast tower which is doubtless the last redoubt of life on Earth (shades of *The Night Land*), but is it the bastion of humanity, or of Frankenstein's demonic progeny?

To borrow a phrase, *Which shall it be?*

Rating: ☆☆☆☆

**The Return of the (Unadulterated) Master**

*The Ghost from the Grand Banks*  
By Arthur C. Clarke  
Bantam, 1990  
288 pp., \$19.95

Two issues back, as you may recall, I made the gloomy prediction that as certain famous bylines are turned into brand names and stamped on just anything — anthologies, commercially-generated collaborations with grossly inferior writers, franchise novels by entirely different writers based on characters or scenarios by the famous one — and the book-racks are flooded with books which, upon closer examination are not what they seem to be, the public is going to get wary. They will cease to trust certain bylines.

See if I'm not right. I profoundly doubt I'm the first person to have this idea. Go to your local paperback store. See how many paperbacks filed under, say, Isaac Asimov, with only his name visible on the spine, are not actually by Isaac Asimov. Last time I counted, it was slightly over half. It's almost as bad in the Clarke section.

Two issues ago, my gloomy prediction was that one day an unquestionably authentic, new Arthur Clarke novel would appear, and it would lose sales because a significant

portion of the readership, however unfairly, however superficially they examined all those other books, wouldn't believe the famous byline anymore.

Well, here we are. I sincerely hope I'm wrong. There is no doubt that *The Ghost from the Grand Banks* is 100% authentic Clarke, which should be remembered alongside *Childhood's End* and the rest when all the franchise junk is forgotten.

It is, I suppose, a minor, charming novel, but also Clarke's best in years. While the later numbered *Odysseys* seemed decreasingly necessary, this one treats on new subject matter and clearly is the product of what has engaged Clarke's imagination of late.

There's not much plot: as the century of the sinking of the *Titanic* nears, two separate outfits propose to raise the wreck, for different motives. Since, as we've known since the ship was located a few years ago, the wreck is in two pieces, the competitors are able to literally divide the spoils. But nature proposes to intervene ....

It's done in a very straightforward manner, with excellent descriptions, the latest science, interesting asides about subjects ranging from Irish gardens to mathematics (a whole appendix on the "Mandelbrot set") and one particularly amusing social prediction: a character has made a fortune with a computer process which digitalizes, then edits old movies. Why? Because in the eyes of the 21st century, cigarette-smoking is seen to be the terrible scourge of the 20th, right up there with AIDS, and to 21st-century sensibilities, the sight of a movie hero *smoking* is so obscene that audiences cannot stand it, thus rendering the film commercially worthless unless it can be "cleaned up." I don't know that any other SF writer has thought of that. It serves to remind us that the future will not regard us as we regard ourselves.

When we get to the end, and have made an eerie visit to the sunken *Titanic*, we're left wondering why this book is so enjoyable, when in conventional terms it is virtually devoid of narrative merit. There is very little story, even less characterization, and not a whole lot of suspense. For an answer, look back to Clarke's *Prelude to Space* (1951), in which the technological wonder of space travel alone maintains interest, and maintains it very well. Clarke is the only writer in

the modern field who can get away with a future-documentary disguised as a novel. He is doing successfully what the Gernsbackian writers tried to do, presenting the speculative elements for their own sake, unadorned by extraneous story. The cast are all spear-carriers, or, more precisely, camera-carriers. They let us see. They take us *there*, wherever there happens to be. That's all. *2061: Odyssey Three*, for all it was worth reading at all, was worth it for the trip through the outer solar system, not for the ostensible story.

The immediate difference between

Clarke and a Gernsbackian writer, of course, is that Clarke can write. But he has almost invented a new form here, something uniquely personal growing out of his own deep fascination with the universe around him.

Rating: ☆☆☆

*The Night Mayor*  
By Kim Newman  
Carroll & Graf, 1990  
192 pp., \$17.95

Kim Newman is a new British writer, a contributor to *Interzone* who

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#### THE LEGION OF TIME

by Jack Williamson

\$10.00

Fantasy Press - 1952 - First Edition, Trade Issue.

The world is a long corridor from the Beginning of existence to the End. Events are groups in a sculptured frieze that runs endlessly along the walls. And Time is a lantern carried steadily through the hall, to illuminate the groups one by one. Again and again the corridor branches, for it is the museum of all that is possible. The bearer of the lantern may take one turning or another. On this premise and against this background Jack Williamson has written perhaps the most thrilling and certainly one of the most unusual of all time travel stories.

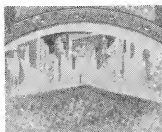


#### SCARLET DREAM

by C. L. Moore

\$20.00

In 1933 C. L. Moore contributed the first of her famous Northwest Smith stories in the old *Weird Tales* magazine. That shadowy tale was called "Shambateau," and it took the Gorgon/Medusa legend out of earthly wrappings and placed it on other worlds. The Northwest Smith stories continued over a period of years. This volume contains ten of these stories. Written in an interplanetary setting, they depend heavily upon fantasy for execution. Ten full color illustrations and dust wrapper by Alicia Austin.

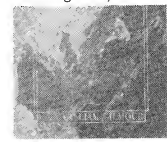


#### WINTER RECKONING

by Noel-Anne Brennan

\$30.00

A sensitive and well crafted science-fiction novel set on a remote world called Tringe. It couples the "Test" of Ruath with the destinies of a representative of the Planetary Federation. The Federation is concerned with trade, study, exploration, and a mutual defense against the Frick, the aggressive, reptilian race outside the Federation whose idea of interstellar relations consists of conquest & domination. Illustrated by Jon J. Muth. Signed by Author and Artist.



#### THE UNDYING LAND

by William Gilmour

\$20.00

Members of the Burroughs Bibliophiles will remember Bill Gilmour, long-time enthusiast and contributor to a number of amateur journals for decades. His full-length novel is a tale of unknown Africa, told in the best tradition of the fantastic adventure. Here is a savage land of strange beasts and stranger men, written in the style of the old pulp magazines. Incredibly fast-moving and great fun. Handsomely designed volume illustrated in full color and black and white by Kevin E. Johnson.



#### S.F. in Old San Francisco-INTO THE SUN

by R D Milne

\$15.00

During the twenty years prior to 1900, Robert Duncan Milne produced at least 60 stories of science fiction and fantasy, and may well have been the genre's first full-time contributor. *Into the Sun* is a sampling of his fiction, and it is full of marvelous imagination and rare scientific genius reaching far beyond his time. Illustrated by Ned Dameron.

has gathered a certain amount of critical acclaim very early in his career. The rumblings from the British press seem to be that he's in danger of being swallowed up by his Jack Yeovil persona, who writes gaming fiction for the "Warhammer" shared universe. But I don't think so. Newman has too much of a distanced sense of irony. He even writes his pseudonym into his first real novel as a minor bad-guy who briefly becomes Jack the Ripper.

(Real novel? We need a better term than that. Much of SF publishing is so much like television these days that new writers are hired to write episodes of established shows before they get a chance to do their own movie-of-the-week, er, I mean solo novels. The distinction is between novels which are generated by the editor or the packager, and the old-fashioned kind, which the author thinks up. So possibly we should say this is Newman's first self-originated novel.)

The *Interzone* reviewer is quoted on the back of the jacket as saying this is "the best movie-thriller-cyberpunk spoof with tears and teeth ever written."

I can't agree. *The Night Mayor* is one of those stories about investigators/adventurers/doctors sent into a subjective, computer-generated dream universe to track down the madman who is running away with it all. Mental duels follow. Imagery flies and splatters like snowballs. Since the universe is largely a mishmash of *film noir*, much of it is a matter of late-night streets (indeed, in the City it is always 2:30 AM and always raining), trenchcoats, and famous movie stars. Verily:

A newspaper, folded headline out, slid past in the gutter ... G-MEN BUST AXIS SPY RING; VEIDT, SANDERS, ZUCCO INDICTED. Untrustworthy faces peered out from mug shots. Yesterday's news.

A train shrieked overhead, lights raking the street. It was on schedule, spotlighting rickety fire escapes. In one of the apartments, Edward G. Robinson was strangling a girl. The passing train pixilated the murder. The girl was obviously a cheap floozy. Joan Bennett? (p.5)

All of which would be enormously clever and original if we hadn't read *The Dream Master* and "Press Enter" and "True Names" and countless

others. The failure of *The Night Mayor* is precisely that it *isn't* effective satire. It doesn't say anything about the form and seems content to play lighthearted games with conventional material. The introduction of Godzilla into this setting is striking, but there's no depth of characterization, and the villain, most especially, is a stock figure, merely there to be villainous on cue.

You could do worse. It's a literate, light read. But you could also do better. So, I hope, can Kim Newman.

Rating: ☆☆

#### Noted:

*Monad, Essays on Science Fiction* #1

Edited by Damon Knight  
Pulphouse, 1990

91 pp., \$5.00 for one issue/4 for \$18.00 (Pulphouse Publishing, Box 1227, Eugene, OR 97440)

I'm glad to see Damon Knight back in the criticism business. Older readers may recall that 45 years ago Knight virtually *invented* the critical essay in the science fiction field with a demolition of A.E. Van Vogt's *The World of Null-A*. Before that, there were only precedents: Lovecraft's "Some Notes on Interplanetary Fiction," which was not widely enough circulated to have much impact, Wells's introduction to his *Seven Famous Novels*, and a few others. But Knight was the first person to build any reputation as a critic in our field. He kept at it. His work was collected as *In Search of Wonder* (1956, revised 1967), and he won a Hugo for it. He was a technical critic, more interested in how the fiction is put together than its inner recesses, but this was enormously useful at the time, and surely made the more ambitious writers write better. The book is still required reading for novice SF authors.

Knight stopped about 1960, for reasons that aren't quite clear. But now he's editing this handy journal of criticism by professional SF writers. (There's some controversy about this: fans and academics need not apply.)

His own "Beauty, Stupidity, Injustice, and Science Fiction" is a memoir of his growing up with science fiction. It makes an occasional factual mistake (e.g., starting *Astounding* in the wrong year) but then goes on to the most incisive analysis of John W.

Campbell's later career and his retreat from greatness that I've ever seen. Knight is of that generation that came into adulthood and authorhood when SF was a very small field dominated by one very large editor. Every writer of that period had to, by accepting him or rejecting him or reaching some compromise, deal with Campbell. What Knight has to say here is of considerable historical importance.

Ursula Le Guin is present with a speech, largely about the genesis of her last Earthsea book. Thomas Disch in a poem and Brian Aldiss in a chapter from *Bury My Heart at W.H. Smith's* open that very difficult and wriggling can of worms: *can the author, in the interests of artistic growth, ever earn the right to bore his audience?* The more Artistically Inclined would say yes, sliding down the slippery semantic slope of what precisely constitutes "entertainment." (Does watching Brian Aldiss struggle with the French anti-novel in *Report on Probability A* constitute entertainment? For some people, it does, in which case he is not exercising whatever boredom option he may have earned on the strength of earlier toilings in the SF vineyard. But the bored readers may just go away. A perilous question indeed.)

Readers may feel some apprehension for Bruce Sterling at the beginning of his essay, in which he seems to be taking Deconstruction, Post-Structuralism, and other modern critical miasmas seriously. But he's too quick for that trap:

The only way to explain this stuff satisfactorily is to put on the skin of its rhetoric and learn to talk just like it does — something *one actually begins to do* after a while, despite one's best intentions, and the effects on one's prose are horrific. (p.58)

Good for you, Bruce Sterling! Here we have in a nutshell the cause for the ruin of Samuel R. Delany. Delany, however, had built such a large audience for himself that when he sank into Postmodern babble he was able to continue on a reduced level and still get published. Sterling couldn't afford to lose that much and survive. It would be the end of his career and he clearly knows it, so, instead, he proposes (wittily and entertainingly) to go through this stuff with a crowbar and pry up any-

thing that might be useful, while leaving the bulk of the useless wreck behind.

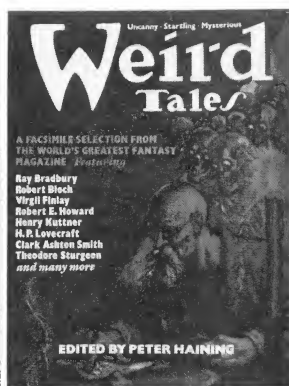
Rating: ☆☆☆☆☆

### *Weird Tales*

Edited by Peter Haining  
Carroll & Graf, 1990  
264 pp., \$21.95

I was less than entirely thrilled, as editor of the contemporary *Weird Tales*, to read in Carroll & Graf's publicity flyer accompanying this book that *Weird Tales* is "no longer published," but to be fair, this is a fine book, a reprint of an edition published in England by Neville Spearman in 1976, consisting of facsimile pages from the first incarnation of the magazine. Since it's apparently a facsimile of a facsimile of pulp printing, the text is occasionally spotty, but most of the time even the artwork comes out well. The selection is good, mostly material from the later '30s and the '40s — presumably because copies from the '20s were just too expensive to cut up for the purpose — with often less well-known material

by top names: an uncollected Bradbury, for instance, plus one of Kuttner's Elak of Atlantis epics, Lovecraft, Clark Ashton Smith, G.G.



Pendarves, Bloch, Leibler, Wellman, Eric Frank Russell, and even a non-supernatural horror story by space-

opera master Edmond Hamilton. Overall this book gives a very good idea of the feel of *WT* during what might be considered its Silver Age.

Rating: ☆☆☆☆

*An Annotated Bibliography of Recursive Science Fiction*  
Compiled by Anthony R. Lewis  
With an introduction by  
Barry N. Malzberg  
NESFA Press, 1990  
56 pp., \$6.00

"Recursive Science Fiction" is SF about SF, of which Aldiss's *Frankenstein Unbound* is one of the best examples. There are a lot more, ranging from fannish in-jokes to serious examinations of the nature of the form. This magazine-format book covers a good deal of them — the only outright omission I could spot was Fritz Leiber's "Time Fighter" — though in many cases it's a matter of degree, and definitions shade off into infinity.

Rating: ☆☆☆☆

□

## A Long Time Ago

Before taking charge at *Aboriginal Science Fiction*, our editor, Charles C. Ryan, was the editor of *Galileo*, a science fiction magazine published in the mid-1970s. During his tenure there, he helped discover a number of new writers who have since gone on to win Nebula and/or Hugo awards, such as Connie Willis, John Kessel, Lewis Shiner, and more.

We think he did a fine job at *Galileo*, and, in fact, it was on the strength of that performance that we picked him to help turn *Aboriginal Science Fiction* into the first successful SF magazine in a decade.

Now, on his behalf, we'd like to give you an opportunity to see some of the best stories he collected a decade ago.

For a limited time, while copies last, you can purchase a first-edition hardcover copy of *Starry Messenger: The Best of Galileo* for \$10, plus \$1 postage and handling. If you would like your copy autographed by the editor, please indicate how you would like the note to read.

*Starry Messenger: The Best of Galileo* (St. Martin's Press, 1979) features 12 stories by the following authors:

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# Views of Armageddon

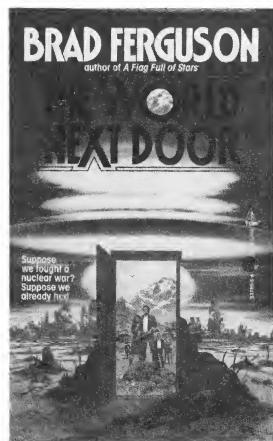
## *The World Next Door*

By Brad Ferguson

Tor, 1990

342 pp., \$3.95

With the amazing changes that have taken place in the world in the past



year or so, it has become much more difficult for SF writers to compose convincing scenarios for nuclear holocaust. (This is probably a worthwhile sacrifice.) Brad Ferguson gets around this problem by setting most of *The World Next Door* in a post-holocaust world in an alternate

timeline, where the Cuban missile crisis of 1962 led to nuclear war.

There were plenty of survivors of the war in this world, because in 1962 the available weapons weren't good enough, numerous enough, or accurate enough to destroy *everything*. It is now about 1999, and the survivors have preserved what they can of the old civilization, establishing small communities. It is in one of these communities — McAndrew, in upstate New York — that Ferguson's story is set. It would be a fairly ordinary story of survival under adverse conditions except for the disturbing dreams that have begun to afflict the inhabitants, dreams which we soon realize are leaks from our own timeline, where nuclear war is about to break out, and this time it will be truly final.

This intriguing plot is, unfortunately, severely weakened by a mystical ending. I hate books that establish a mystery and then end with an explanation that a "higher force" has been the cause of it all. Up until that point, though, *The World Next Door* is fascinating as it depicts the everyday struggles of the alternate-world inhabitants and contrasts them with the lives of those in our timeline. The author includes some marvelous details of this other world; I particularly liked the discovery of the very last six-pack of Coca-Cola.

Ferguson does have to do some handstands to justify World War III breaking out in our world; even with a reactionary Soviet government in power, it's now hard to imagine a Soviet juggernaut advancing through Europe. However, this is a minor matter. The book is unusual and involving, and it works beautifully, except for the ending.

Rating: ★★☆☆

## *Lifeline*

By Kevin J. Anderson

and Doug Beason

Bantam/Spectra, 1990

400 pp., \$4.95

*Lifeline* is another post-holocaust



novel, this one set in our own future. In this case, the focus is on the inhabitants of the small colonies at the L-4 and L-5 points, and on the moon, who are stranded when war breaks out on the Earth. We never see the results of the war on Earth, as the book centers on the colonists' struggle to survive what seems certain doom.

Americans run the lunar colony and the space habitat Orbitech, and Soviets the space habitat Kibalkich. There is also an independent Filipino colony, Aguinaldo. The relationship between the Americans and Soviets is tense and suspenseful, and it takes

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## Rating System

★★★★★	Outstanding
★★★★	Very Good
★★★	Good
★★	Fair
★	Poor

some inventiveness on the part of the Filipinos to help all to survive. The plot can't be explained without spoiling it; it is complicated, but comprehensible.

The political set-up leaves something to be desired. World War III might have been more convincingly depicted as breaking out over a Third World flashpoint, and the Soviet characters are too much like Cold War stereotypes; the authors have established that a reactionary government is now in charge of the U.S.S.R., but you can't just erase all the changes

seful near-future SF novel, with some intriguing perspectives to offer.

Rating: ☆☆☆+

### Good Omens

By Neil Gaiman and Terry Pratchett  
Workman Press, 1990  
354 pp., \$18.95

We may often refer to a potential nuclear holocaust as Armageddon, but here's a novel about the real thing, the ultimate battle between Good and Evil. In the hands of Neil Gaiman and Terry Pratchett, though, Armageddon is not frightening, but uproarious. *Good Omens* is one of the funniest books I've read in years.

If you like Pratchett's Discworld novels, you'll have some idea of the tone of this book. If you're unfamiliar with them, you have a treat in store. The humor is unmistakably British, but comprehensible to Americans, particularly with a few helpful (and hilarious) footnotes. This is the kind of book you should not read in public if you don't want passers-by to think you're nuts.

The improbable plot involves infants switched at birth, the raising of the Antichrist as a human child (as in *The Omen*), and the efforts of the angel Aziraphale and the demon Crowley, who have known each other since the Garden of Eden, to work together to avert Armageddon. Along the way, we meet such characters as Agnes Nutter, a witch and seeress; Newton Pulsifer, an unenthusiastic witch-hunter; the four Bikers of the Apocalypse; and Dog, an unconvincing hellhound. Unlike many primarily humorous books, this one has a plot that holds together and even makes sense, given the weird ground rules.

What else can I say? Buy it, read it; we can use all the laughs we can get these days.

Rating: ☆☆☆+

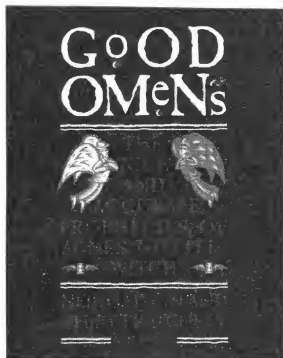
### Eight Skilled Gentlemen

By Barry Hughart  
Foundation/Doubleday, 1990  
256 pp., \$21.95 hc, \$10.95 pb

*Eight Skilled Gentlemen* is Barry Hughart's third book about Master Li and Number Ten Ox, the Holmes and Watson of "an ancient China that never was," where myth and fantasy blend with historical reality. (The first novel, *Bridge of Birds*, won a

well-deserved World Fantasy Award.) As you would expect from Hughart, it is delightful, though it lacks some of the poetry of his two previous books.

Master Li must, of course, solve another mystery, this one a wild mix of counterfeit tea, smuggling, vengeance, sorcery, murder, and cookery. The mystery is well-constructed and intriguing, and I loved the use of the folklore of the aboriginal inhabitants of China — though it's impossible to tell where real folklore leaves off and Hughart's wild imagination begins, which is part of the charm of these



and have everything be exactly as it was. I liked the depiction of Filipino culture in Aginaldo colony, though I can't speak for its accuracy.

The characters, unfortunately, have that one- or two-dimensional feel so common in hard SF. The authors are, however, successful at depicting the gradual corruption of power on Orbitech and the colony's leader's increasingly desperate attempts to justify his actions to himself; the use of corporate culture is brilliant.

The scientific extrapolation is not fully convincing. The bio-engineered creatures used for transport strain credulity a bit, but worse is the vital "weavewire," which is just *too* convenient — it's indestructible, you can make infinite supplies from practically nothing as fast as you want — it's far too easy a solution to the colonists' problems.

Anderson and Beason have tackled an unusual situation, and have done a generally good job. The complaints I have mentioned don't keep the book from being a thoughtful and suspenseful



books.

As ever, Hughart mixes his fantasy adroitly with humor; the very first scene will have you roaring with laughter (especially for its shot at literary critics). The caveat about the lack of poetry does not apply to the climactic boat race, which is brilliant. Even though *Eight Skilled Gentlemen* is not quite up to the standard of the two previous volumes, it is still an impressive achievement that is enjoyable on many levels.

Rating: ☆☆☆+

### Wind Dancers

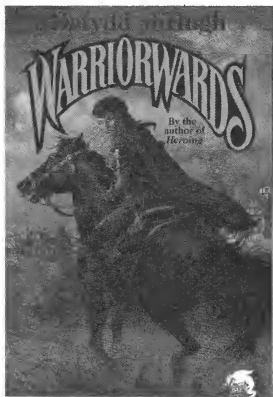
By R. M. Meluch  
Roc, 1990  
166 pp., \$3.50

Sometimes, for no good reason, worthwhile books that are published sink without a trace. If the author is lucky, the book may be reissued, in the hope that this time it will find its audience. Such is the case with R. M. Meluch's 1981 novel, *Wind Dancers*,

just reprinted by Roc, and well worth seeking out. (The sequel, *Wind Child*, has also been reprinted, but I have not yet read it.)

The planet Aeolis is a paradise, settled by the very wealthy and aristocratic from Earth. Before terraforming and colonization could begin, Aeolis was certified as having no native life — but questions about that are growing. A team of investigators is trying to find the answers, but the unscrupulous inhabitants have no intention of losing their world. Meanwhile, the natives, to whom we were introduced at the beginning of the book, are engaged in a strange and fascinating struggle for survival.

While *Wind Dancers* is not as polished as Meluch's more recent work, it is creative and absorbing. It



hooks the reader early with the mystery of the alien life on Aeolis, and maintains the mystery and suspense. It is well paced, with generally good characters and a carefully constructed plot.

There are a few notable flaws. The villain is overdrawn, with her vicious lust for blood; real-life evil tends to be banal, not to betray itself with an enjoyment of sick pleasures. Laure Remington, one of the central characters, is so obnoxious that it's hard to feel sympathy for the man who falls tragically in love with her, particularly since the character should know better. One crucial revelation near the end comes out of the blue, with no earlier indication that such a thing was possible.

Overall, though, *Wind Dancers* is exciting, interesting, and deserving of having been rescued from oblivion.

Rating: ☆☆☆

#### Warriorwards

By Dafydd ab Hugh  
Baen, 1990

344 pp., \$4.50

Dafydd ab Hugh's first novel, *Heroing*, was an unusual sword and sorcery tale with a likable hero, which questioned the very idea of being a "hero." He has brought the brilliant swordswoman Jiana back for another adventure in *Warriorwards*. While enjoyable, this book is sometimes opaque and suffers from a frustrating incompleteness.

Sick of her life as a performer in taverns, taking on all opponents for a fee, Jiana sets out to follow a prophecy and finds herself determined to free the Toolian slave-girl Radiance (sic). Once again she finds herself in conflict with the petulant boy-god Toq; as if that weren't bad enough, the newly-freed Radiance is determined that Jiana shall teach her to be a warrior.

I found the basic plot set-up difficult to swallow. It is not unreasonable to argue that you can't just free a slave, she has to learn to free herself. However, I could not believe that Jiana had to spend months in the caravan as a slave herself in order to show Radiance the way. Once you get past that premise, though, the plot developments are convincing, though Toq's goals are confusing. The plot is only partly resolved at the end of the book, with a plug given for the next book; this cheats the reader, and caused me to downgrade the book's rating.

The characters are fine, with Jiana as engaging as ever. There's a certain lack of originality in the creation of Toolian culture, though. Just because the Toolians are a nomadic desert people doesn't mean that their culture should be a copy of Arab culture, but it is, down to a religion started by a Seer who forbids alcohol. I'd have liked to have seen some more inventiveness; ab Hugh has shown that he is capable of it.

One complaint I have is with the publisher, not the author. The lack of copy-editing on this book is shameful. It is bad enough when errors like "alright" appear time and again, but when the word "radiance" is consis-

tently misspelled although it is also used as the name of one of the main characters, the editor should be shot. This kind of sloppiness is a grave disservice to the author.

While *Warriorwards* is more polished than *Heroing*, it doesn't have the same enjoyable flow — it's muddled and incomplete. However, if you liked Jiana's first adventure, you'll be interested in reading this one, though you may want to wait until the sequel comes out.

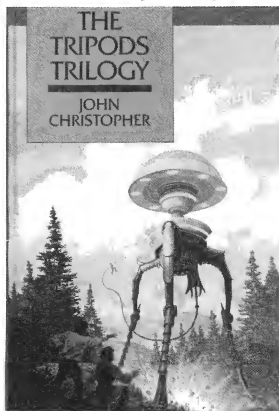
Rating: ☆☆☆

#### Bully!

By Mike Resnick  
Axolotl Press/Pulphouse, 1990

110 pp., \$10 pb, \$35 hc, \$65 leather

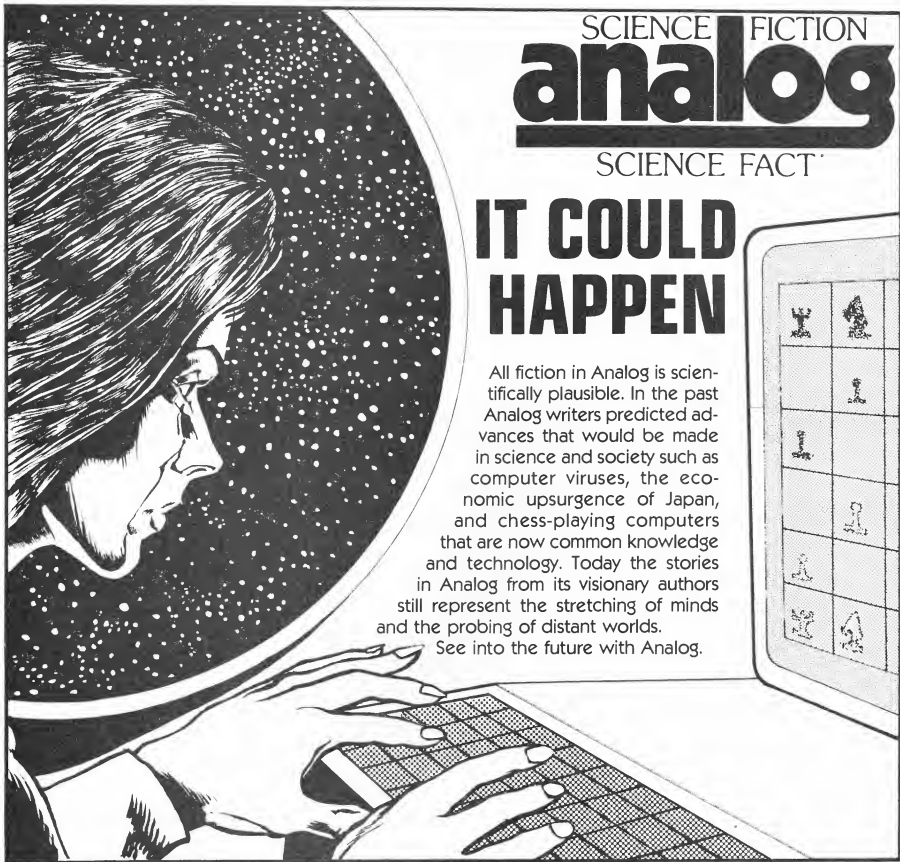
Axolotl Press is publishing a series



of short novels in paperback form which has generally been worthwhile. With *Bully!*, Mike Resnick, one of the most interesting writers in the field, takes on one of America's most interesting historical figures, Theodore Roosevelt.

In this alternate history, Roosevelt, at loose ends after leaving the Presidency, is persuaded by a group of ivory poachers in the Congo (then under Belgian rule) to help them organize central Africa. He soon turns this into a project to force out the Belgians and give the inhabitants of the Congo an American-style democracy, whether they want it or not. The story follows his convincing and sometimes amusing adventures and misadventures along the way.

Resnick has made fine use of Roosevelt's strengths — such as a



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stubborn dedication to democracy — and weaknesses — primarily arrogance, giving us a well-rounded portrait of an often-misunderstood man. However, if you're looking for serious alternate-history extrapolation, look elsewhere; this is a short novel about a small region over a short period of time. If you like historical fiction at all, you will find *Bully!* most enjoyable.

Rating: ☆☆☆

*When the Tripods Came*

By John Christopher  
Collier/Macmillan, 1990  
151 pp., \$3.95

John Christopher's Tripods trilogy is a classic of young adult science fiction, telling the story of the struggle to oust Earth's alien conquerors. Now Christopher has written a prequel; as should be obvious from the title, it tells the story of how the Tripods came to rule the Earth.

Laurie is an average English boy with average problems: his father doesn't talk to him much, he doesn't like his stepmother, and his little half-sister Angela gets all the attention. Those problems fade to nothing once the Tripods arrive, though. At first the alien invaders seem laughable, incompetent, but once the extent of their mind-control abilities becomes clear, life becomes eerie and suspenseful — nobody can be trusted. Laurie and his family go on the run, seeking always to avoid the Tripods and their brainwashed slaves, and somehow keep a free remnant of humanity alive.

The book is frighteningly convincing as it shows the gradual takeover of Earth by the Tripods. It's depressing, because we know from the beginning that the Tripods will win, though Laurie's family keeps humanity's hope alive. Laurie is a sympathetic main character, and the other characters are believable, though I wish that not all the important child characters were boys (Angela is relatively passive).

The book makes a fine addition to the Tripods trilogy, and can be read either before or after the other books. The series is one of the better introductions to SF available for young readers.

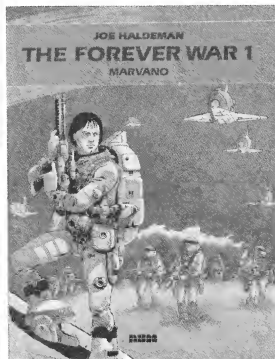
Rating: ☆☆☆

## Two Graphic Adaptations of Famous Novels:

*The Hobbit*

By J.R.R. Tolkien,  
illustrated by David Wenzel  
Ballantine, 1990  
138 pp., \$12.95

David Wenzel's graphic rendering of Tolkien's classic *The Hobbit* is difficult to find fault with. The adaptation is as faithful as one could wish, the watercolor drawings are lovely and capture the feel of the book (the hobbits are not cute), and the story, as ever, works beautifully. But so much is lost in the condensation of the story, and I'm not sure the trade is worth it. Those already familiar with *The Hob-*



*bit* should enjoy this version, but I would urge anyone who isn't to read the original instead.

Rating: ☆☆☆

*The Forever War 1:*

*Private Mandella*  
By Joe Haldeman,  
illustrated by Marvano  
NBM, 1990  
Unnumbered, \$8.95

*The Forever War* is yet another graphic adaptation for which the necessity and desirability are questionable. Marvano's art is just right, and the text (by Haldeman himself) naturally faithful. Again, though, much of the original award-winning novel is lost, and far too large a proportion of this first volume must be

spent in exposition, which can't be made exciting even with pictures. By the end of this volume, the story's barely gotten started, leaving one wondering what the point of it is. The most worthwhile part of the book is Haldeman's introduction, in which he talks about his experiences in Vietnam and the genesis of *The Forever War*. Other than that, I'd recommend that only completists or serious graphic novel fans bother.

Rating: ☆☆☆

**Noted:**

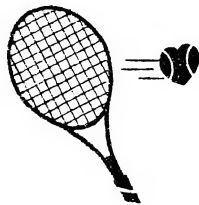
*Davy*  
By Edgar Pangborn  
Collier Nucleus, 1990  
266 pp., \$4.95

Collier Nucleus's wonderful SF reprint program continues with Edgar Pangborn's *Davy*, one of the field's true classics. No one should miss this picaresque post-holocaust tale. The thoughtful foreword by Peter S. Beagle is interesting and discusses the book's flaws as well as its merits. If you have not read *Davy*, go to your bookstore immediately and get it; you will repay the effort many times over.

(One minor thing I wish reprint publishers would be more careful about is reprinting the "About the Author" page verbatim from a previous edition; it's disconcerting to be told (correctly) on the back cover that Pangborn died in 1976, and then have the "About the Author" page claim that "he now lives and writes in upstate New York.") □

## Take your heart to court.

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# Dangerous Technology



Almost every bad science fiction film ever made has a "mad scientist" lurking somewhere. Either it's a Dr. Frankenstein who creates a befuddled monster instead of human life while playing God, or a Dr. Strangelove who has as much trouble controlling his murderous hand as he does the B-52s swooping down to turn Moscow into a nuclear hell.

Even though Robert A. Metzger, our science columnist, regularly demonstrates that scientists are really nice people, just like us — people who don't even like to wash their cars — the Mad Max image persists.

After all, in the guise of Dr. Frankenstein, scientists gave us atomic weapons when most were trying to unlock the secrets of the universe, or at least unleash limitless energy to power a peaceful world — at least that's the popular theory. But in reality it was the politicians and military strategists who gave us the A-bomb, in a mad, 20-yard dash to beat the Germans during World War II.

Chemists gave us fetus-deforming Thalidomide when all they were trying to do was calm folks down with a little tranquilizer. They gave us egg-crushing DDT, when all they were trying to do was keep the insects off our food and cut down on malaria caused by mosquito bites.

Electrical engineers gave us the telephone as a boon to instant communication but didn't stop to consider obscene phone calls and computerized salesthings (really obscene phone calls). They didn't figure teen-age phone-stasis either.

It isn't always the scientists who provide such gifts to humanity. More often it's the engineers and inventors, those who dabble at converting theory into reality.

Robert Fulton, Henry Ford, and Orville and Wilbur Wright each, in their way, led to the *Titanic*, massive highway fatalities and gridlock, and a spate of dreadful *Airport* movies, when all they intended was to make travel a bit faster and more comfortable.

Anybody paying close attention has realized by now that these generalizations and mischaracterizations are unfair.

Henry Ford isn't to blame when a

drunk driver wipes out a swarm of pedestrians. The Wright brothers can't be faulted for the bombing over Lockerbie. And Fulton wasn't thinking of Trident missiles.

The simple fact is that no matter how good the idea, no matter how clever the invention, someone, somewhere — usually for a buck — will find a way to corrupt it, to turn that genius into an evil beyond redemption.

Yet, despite all of the corruption, greed, and warfare, humanity is much better off now, with all these inventions, than it was back in the good old days. The good old days when people drank polluted water, became infested with worms from infected food, spent their entire lives in the same location, and barely made it to age 35.

Until now.

Now the greedy-grubbers, the technomaniacs, have finally gone too far. They have finally crossed the boundary between business and insanity, between propriety and wastrel degradation.

Perhaps you are lucky. Perhaps you haven't been exposed to this evil incarnate, this submission to the dark side of the Force. It's possible you haven't seen otherwise ordinary and fine people become sucked up in this whirlwind of villainy sweeping east from torrid and decadent California.

If you haven't, be careful. Stay at home. Keep your doors locked. Don't answer the phone. And most important of all, if you do nothing else, never, ever go into a nightclub, or even a hotel lounge, or you may be doomed beyond hope, cursed beyond despair.

I know I was innocent. I encountered this evil quite by accident, never knowing what lay in wait.

My wife and I had gone out for dinner to celebrate our wedding anniversary. Afterwards, pretending (to myself) I could ignore my usual left-footedness and fake a dance or two, I suggested we stop at a nearby Marriott Hotel lounge for an after-dinner drink and dance or two. Foolish me.

There was a disc jockey on the small stage. Laser lights flickered in time with the music. A small but festive crowd kept the waitresses busy. But there was something odd about the arrangement. There were two large TV monitors on the stage, and a microphone. One monitor faced the audience, the other the stage.

It was a Karaoke (named after the inventor, of course).

The concept behind the Karaoke appears harmless enough. The disc jockey plays a popular song selected by a member of the audience (sometimes two, or even more — they have no sense of decency). And then he hands them a microphone and they sing. This isn't lip-synching — God, Milli Vanilli is heaven by comparison. No, some creative genius devised a way to mute the voice track on the CD. Instead of hearing Michael Jackson or Madonna, the captive crowd is treated to the sounds of the volunteers (s) from the audience.

When I was younger and in school the wonderful concepts of lasers and masers were being banded about in the science magazines. And, of course, as with any wonderful new invention, the military strategists were already imagining ways of twisting these marvels into weapons of awesome destruction.

Masers that would shatter enemy bridges into billions of tiny pieces by simply harnessing intense, coherent waves of sound and beaming them at the target. Imagine alloy steel crumbling, diamonds decomposing into carbon dust.

Karaoke is much worse. It makes the maser little but a child's toy. It makes the A-bomb a modest firecracker.

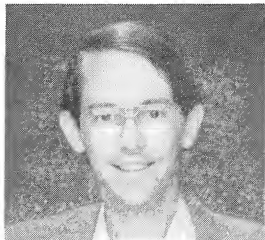
You can't begin to imagine how excruciatingly painful it is to sit, pinned in a room by the masses, while your ears are tortured beyond belief. And the off-key shriek doesn't stop there. The fillings in your teeth rattle painfully, filling your mouth with a coppery taste. The food in your stomach surges in a bleak effort to escape. Your bones are invaded by hundreds of sonic spinal taps. And the culprits on the stage smile like drunken zombies, imagining themselves Bruce Springsteen or Sinead O'Connor because *THEY CAN'T HEAR THEMSELVES*.

Fiendish. Ghoulish. Vile. Despicable.

I may never be able to listen to music again without cringing in paranoid suspicion that it may mutate into Karaoke and melt my soul.

At least before the Karaoke, people were civilized enough to confine that kind of shamelessly obscene behavior to the shower and keep the doors and windows closed. Damned technology, what has it wrought?

# Neural Memories



Imagine that you have this wondrous filing cabinet, one that you have diligently filled with every aspect of your life, every memory and thought, everything ranging from what your favorite ice cream is to your brother's shoe size, and including such highlights as that time you were twelve years old and that yappy mutt from down the street tried to take a chomp out of your rear end when you snuck into old lady Bemeyer's yard to get your ball, and the first time you and six of your closest friends snuck into the drive-in by hiding in the trunk of someone's car. It's all there in this filing cabinet. You see a beautiful sunset, write down what it looked like on a nice little index card, give it an identification number, and then place it in the filing cabinet. The card before it describes the burnt toast you had that morning, and the card after it will describe the bee that stung you just after the sun set.

Wonderful.

You can open the cabinet whenever you want, and wander through all those memories.

But suppose that you want to do more than just wander through the filing cabinet. Suppose you want to look up a specific memory. What if you'd like to recall the eye color of old Johnny Horton, that kid back in the fourth grade who had the remarkable ability of being able to blow chocolate milk out through his nose?

What do you do?

It's easy. All that's required is that you look up the file number at which this valuable little tidbit is located.

No problem, you think at first.

You start for the filing cabinet.

And then you discover that there

is a problem.

Which drawer do you open? Which file are you looking for? You can't remember. Is the color of Johnny Horton's eyes recorded in file #548970 or file #45? You have absolutely no idea.

You can't remember the file number in which that little gem of information is stored. You can remember the file numbers that contain other information about Johnny Horton: file #6578 (his red hair and freckles), file #998750 (his dented Huff bike), file #584967 (his little sister Susy's always-scabby knees), and file #9804 (his Swiss army knife — the kind with the little scissors). But none of this brings you any closer to finding the file that contains the information about the color of his eyes. All you can do is sit there and check all the files until you stumble across the correct one.

That's a lot of files.

It probably would take forever to check through all of them.

Are you saying to yourself that no one would be so stupid as to simply assign random numbers to random memories and then dump them into some massive box?

Does this approach seem crazy?

I agree.

But this is how computers work — all of them — by searching through files in quest of information — searching memory locations in disk drives, or silicon chips. The reason computers can get by with this less than impressive technique of having to check on so many memory locations is that they are fast, incredibly fast — a high-speed computer could check all the entries in your phone book in a matter of seconds.

But you don't have one of these incredibly fast computers. You're

stuck with your filing cabinet and that three pounds of pink stuff between your ears.

So you begin to wonder if there is a better filing system. Could there be another way of doing this, one that doesn't depend on brute force?

Yes.

A new technology is being developed, one based on what takes place in your head, one that tries to model itself on the neurons and synaptic connections that fill your brain.

Associative memory.

I can't remember the color of Johnny Horton's eyes. So what does my brain do? Does it start to search through all my memories like the computer would? No. It thinks about Johnny Horton. I remember about his little sister and her scabby knees, about that wonderful Swiss army knife of his, and that massive and dented old bike that he could only get rolling if it was pointed downhill. I think about that. And what I discover as I think about those things is that my image of Johnny Horton becomes stronger and stronger. I can remember the scar under his left eye. I can remember the granite walkway up to his front door. I can remember that his mother always packed an apple in his lunch — and also remember that he would never eat it.

Try this.

Remember back to the fourth grade.

Remember the classroom.

Remember the desks, the chalkboard, the teacher, and the clock that never seemed to move quickly enough. Can you see it? Stare at it. Fill in the dark corners. Can you remember that little girl

with the funny pony tails, or that chubby boy who was always catching lizards?

You can remember it all.

Each memory leads to another one. These memories are associated. They are not located in a single physical spot in your brain, in a location that is labeled "fourth grade." No. They float throughout your brain. There is no surgeon in the world who can open you up and remove just the right microscopic slice of pink mush so that when you wake up after surgery you'll find that the fourth grade has vanished.

No.

And suddenly, as I think about all of this, I know the color of Johnny Horton's eyes. I can see them. He is standing outside the lunch room, blowing chocolate milk out through his nose, and I can see his eyes. I can remember them. His eyes are the same color as chocolate milk.

His eyes are brown.

Why could I remember this?

Why could I find this memory

without having to review all the memories in my head?

What makes me so much more efficient at recalling information than millions of dollars worth of the best hardware that IBM can provide?

The answer is: because of my wiring.

It's because of the neurons in my head and how they're put together. If I were a computer with a brain full of transistors, each one of those transistors would be fed by a single transistor that would then in turn feed another single transistor. Everything takes place in a serial fashion. It's like reading one file after another — just like looking through my filing cabinet.

But my brain isn't wired that way. My neurons are not little switches that flick on and off because of a signal coming in from another neuron. There are thousands of neurons feeding that neuron, each with a slightly different signal strength. It might take

the firing of just a few of those input neurons to fire the next neuron, or it might take thousands — each neuron is a little bit different. And when it does fire, it does not send its signal to the next neuron, but to thousands of them. The wiring in your brain is a tangled mess, signals going everywhere, back and forth, even feeding back on themselves — it is the ultimate parallel system. This tangled mess is referred to as a neural network. The most amazing thing about this net is that the act of thinking changes it, alters the intensity of the signals that are firing between neurons. Memory is not stored at any one given location in this network. Memory is stored everywhere, constantly changing as the signals in your brain are changing.

I will paint you a picture.

Imagine your mind looks like a plain of rolling hills and at the bottom of these hills, around their bases, are lakes. These lakes are the low spots where water gathers, or,

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in the case of your brain, where information gathers — memories.

Your brain does not physically resemble this. It is simply a model to help illustrate how your mind works.

Think about this carefully — all that tangled wiring creates this type of information sink. Now imagine that you want to know the color of Johnny Horton's eyes. You don't know the file number for this, but you don't have to. One of those lakes represents the fact that Johnny has a Swiss army knife. This is a clear and strong memory. You find yourself sitting in that memory lake, remembering his knife. But now you want to leave this lake and search for his eye color. What happens?

Associative memory.

Because of the convoluted, parallel way that your brain is wired, those nearby lakes contain other memories of Johnny. One is about his sister, one is about his bike, and one is about the color of his eyes.

They are close by in this imaginary landscape because of the way your brain is wired. You slosh around in the first lake until you eventually jump out and roll down the nearby hill and find yourself in the next lake.

You suddenly know that Johnny Horton's eyes are brown.

You've remembered.

This landscape of hills and lakes is continually changing as a function of what you're thinking. If you suddenly want to remember when your mother's birthday is, the hills and lakes will shift and you'll find yourself in a new lake, one that might deal with your mother, or important dates, or parties. In the vicinity of this lake will be the bit of memory that tells you when your mother was born.

Your brain works like this because of the parallel, convoluted, almost chaotic wiring that it's built out of. You aren't very good at multiplying 4723 by 7689. Computers and their serial, file-cabinet type brains are experts at this. But your brain can look at a face and instantly recognize it. It works in a convoluted, parallel manner. The most powerful computers in the world cannot recognize a face.

So what does all this mean?

People are now beginning to syn-

thesize neurons. They are building them, creating circuits that behave like one of your neurons, one that doesn't simply fire because a single signal strikes it. One neuron might have to be hit ten times before it fires, another might need a hundred hits. And they are now wiring these neurons together.

Neural memories have been built.

And they are horrible at multiplying numbers.

But some have been taught to speak, and to understand a human voice. Some have been wired together to act like your eyes, and some like your ears.

But they can't recognize a face.

Not yet.

And they don't always come up with the right answers, don't always understand the questions that are asked of them, and often get confused.

Does this sound familiar?

It should — it happens in your head all the time.

I have barely scratched the surface with this column. It is a field that is exploding at an exponential rate. You can already get simple neural-net programs that will boot in your home computer. Ten years from now you may have neural nets on your toasters that will understand your mumbled request for something that looks like a charcoal briquette, while all you have to do is sniff and cough in the direction of your phone and its neural net will know just what those noises mean and will call up your boss and tell him or her that you'll be out sick today. And twenty years from now, when you make those same sick noises, your phone will call up your boss and tell her or him that you're faking a cold and that you should be fired and replaced by a neural net it knows that just happens to be out of work but is looking for a position in sales.

Welcome to the future.

For those of you who are interested in further reading I would suggest *Apprentices of Wonder — Inside the Neural Network Revolution*, by William F. Allman, published by Bantam (1989 for \$10.95), which gives a good introduction for those who would like to minimize any mathematical encounters. The journal *Neural Networks*, put out by Pergamon Press, presents this new field in all of its technical

glory and should be available in most university libraries. □

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# Greetings

**O**ur alien publisher excluded, should we be so eager to greet little green men from another planet? Award-winning science fiction writer **David Brin** gives us a few reasons why that might not be such a good idea in his essay "The Dangers of First Contact."

Brin, an astrophysicist by training, stays close to the subject of aliens with his



**Ann K. Schwader**

involvement in SETI (the Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence). The latest book by the author of *The Uplift War*, *Startide Rising*, and *The Postman is Earth*, published by Bantam/Spectra.

Brin was not around to give me the details, but I hear through the grapevine that he is engaged to be married sometime this spring and he is currently living in Paris.

We can certainly hope first contact doesn't resemble anything like "Nectar" by



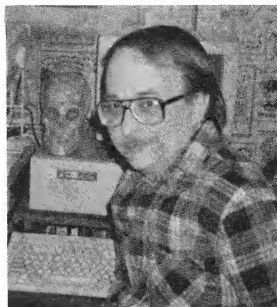
**Cortney Skinner**

**Ann K. Schwader**, or we're in for a heap of trouble.

Schwader is the author of "Muttmind" (Jan.-Feb. 1988) and "Killing Gramps" (Sept.-Oct. 1988). She says the Denver traffic depicted in the story "is really that bad."

Schwader has a book of poetry called *Werewoman and Other Stories* being published by Nocturnal Publications and she's writing book reviews for *Midnight Graffiti*. She's also working on some other short stories for *Aboriginal*. Schwader, who wrote her master's thesis on women in SF admits she likes having female protagonists in her stories. This is the second convincing female cop we've seen, but Schwader says she doesn't have any close friends or relatives who are police officers.

The "Nectar" illustration and cover art are by **Cortney Skinner**. He says a photographer, author and illustrator were



**Rick Shelley**

the models for the cover piece, namely **Shelburne Thurber**, **Geary Gravel**, and **Tom Kidd**. Skinner says he rigged them up with uniforms and phony weapons, then had them strike an "impossible" pose long enough for him to snap their picture.

In "Only a Game" by **Rick Shelley**, video games have a nasty bite. Shelley says it's the only time he's tried to get the flavor of another writer's style in his work, in this case, **Mickey Spillane**. Shelley says he's been haunted by the work of another Shelley, *Frankenstein*, since he "was very little



and writing on walls." So he had no choice but to become a science fiction writer.

His first novel, "Son of the Hero," was published by NAL/ROC. The second book in the Varanyan Memoir, *The Hero of Varany* is due out this July. His most recent short stories include "The Sylph" and "Eyewall" in *Analog* and "Eats" in *Unique*.

"Only a Game" is illustrated by **Lori**



**Lori Deitrick**

**Deitrick**, who, like Shelley, lives in Tennessee. Deitrick says she is doing some gaming illustrations for the first time, drawing fifty characters for a 1920s-style murder mystery game for Chaosium.

When I spoke to her, Shelley was busy with holiday decorating and working on Christmas presents. Every time there's a new baby in her family, she is called on to do a portrait.

**Robert A. Metzger** is back with "The Cubist and the Madman." It's classic gonzo



**Terry McGarry**

SF with a seemingly mad protagonist who got that way in a strange but logical fashion. In this case, the insanity was caused by learning mathematics too well.

Metzger has just sold the sequel to his novel *Quad World*, published by NAL/ROC, and is shopping around his novel *The Last Messiah*.

Metzger says he was recently interviewed as a writer/scientist for a *Pepperdine University* magazine. He has also



Joyce K. Jensen

agreed to judge short stories with Orson Scott Card. Metzger is now a part-time scientist, part-time writer, and he says he "wouldn't do either full time."

"The Cubist and the Madman" is illustrated by Larry Blamire. He says he had a good time trying to capture the style of a cubist painting in one of the illustrations.

Actor/artist/playwright Blamire just finished playing a corporate lawyer on the Fox Television weekly drama *Against the Law*. He says the character of Bill Pleasant was "kind of cold" but playing him was different and fun.

"For Fear of Little Men" by Terry McGarry is a fable about Irish feuds in a post-holocaust era. McGarry, author of the poem "Imprinting" (March-April 1989), had just received a promotion when I spoke to her and is now an associate editor at *The New Yorker*. She also freelances as a copy editor for Del Rey.

McGarry has a story appearing in the anthology *Skin of the Soul*, published by Pocket, and a poem coming out in *Asimov's*. She's now working on a fantasy novel about a world where part of the magic resides in illuminated manuscripts. McGarry, who likes to stay close to her Celtic roots, says she's been doing a lot of social dancing known as Irish Ceili dancing.

"For Fear of Little Men" is illustrated by Patricia Davis. While she read SF as a kid, Davis didn't know anyone painted it until she was an adult. She got an inkling from watching the work of astronomical artists on the PBS series *Cosmos*. Then she discovered love and fandom in southern Florida. She met her future husband at her first SF convention.

Davis has been a full-time professional artist for the past six years. During that time, she has done almost no illustrations,

making her living doing original art work. She is working on some book illustrations for Easton Press only because "the editor bugged me." Luckily, our editor bugged her to do *Aboriginal* work, and she loved McGarry's story.

"To Whom Shall I Tell My Sorrow?" by Joyce K. Jensen depicts a novel form of punishment for criminals — letting them feel the grief of a victim's family.

Jensen is a freelance writer for regional magazines and does public relations work as well. She is working on an SF novel called *Hunters*. An excerpt was published as the short story "Gathering Data on New Greenland" in the *Arts Indiana Literary Supplement* in 1989. Jensen started an Indianapolis writers' group two years ago and says it's been great for eliciting comments and encouragement.

Pat Morrissey illustrates "To Whom Shall I Tell My Sorrow?" When I spoke with her, Morrissey was working on a Baltimore Science Center Project and illustrating an Easton Press classic science fiction book, *Stardance* by Spider Robinson. She just started working with a New York agent and is collaborating on some projects with her sister, artist Rosemary Barrett. Morrissey has been living in Bellport, New York since August and says she likes Eastern Long Island quite a bit.

"MisFITS" is an action-packed space adventure by Mike Byers. (Would-be writers take note: this is his first fiction sale.) Byers started writing articles as a military pilot for the U.S. Air Force. He says he was involved in covert operations in Laos and knew "some famous criminals" who also got their start there.

Byers is now an artist, doing commissioned work in stained and leaded glass. He says he was encouraged to try science fiction writing by author Steve Perry. He started a correspondence with Perry after picking up one of his books in a Montreal airport.

Byers lives in a little town in Virginia

with his wife, a schoolteacher, and his son, an architecture student.

"MisFITS" is illustrated by Bob Eggleton, who has so many projects going, I can only mention a few here. He's illustrating *TekLords*, the sequel to William Shatner's novel *TekWar*, for Easton Press. And he just finished ten black-and-white and two color illustrations for a special edition of James Michener's *Space*.

He's doing a cover for the Arthur C.



Mike Byers

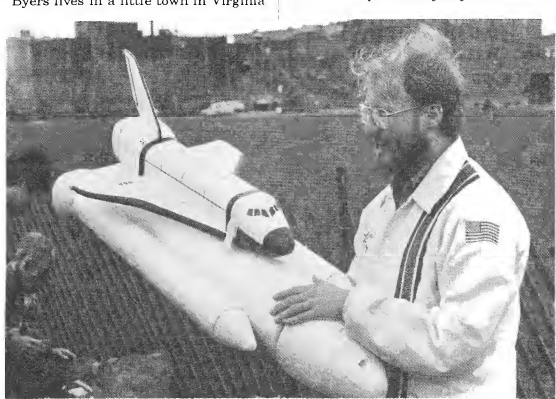
Clarke/Gregory Benford novel *Beyond the Fall of Night*, coming out in May from Ace. And he's even found time to do some paintings of Neptune and Venus based on the latest information being sent back by spacecraft such as Magellan.

"A Month of Sundays" is written by Geoffrey A. Landis, who won the 1989 Nebula Award for his short story "Ripples in a Dirac Sea".

A NASA employee at the Lewis Research Center, Landis is unmarried. He says, "I seem to be spending an inordinate amount of time playing Tetris lately."

An owner of two cats, his pet peeve is SF writers who misuse the word sentient to mean intelligent.

Landis has another poem set for an upcoming issue of *Aboriginal* and we've run out of space to say any more. □



Geoffrey A. Landis

# MisFITS

## By Mike Byers

### Art by Bob Eggleton

Van Lohr checked the seal on the last cylinder, replaced it in its foam bed, and began to reassemble the shielding and deck plate. When he had tightened the last bolt, he stowed the driver and turned to inspect the loose cargo. One of the shockfoam containers had slipped from under the tie-down strap; it would be simple enough to jam it back in place and cinch the webbing down. When he gave the box a push, the lid popped off and lazily drifted toward him. He made a grab for the errant lid, slipped in the microgravity of the cargo compartment, and kicked the open container, causing its contents to spill. Four cobalt-blue cylinders, exactly like the ones he'd hidden below the deck plate, slowly drifted across the compartment.

Buddha on a stick! His first thought was that someone else was running *haalaf* oil — but, no, that didn't necessarily follow. The blue cylinders were standard, zero-porosity pressure containers; industrial grade, and useful for keeping their contents leak- and contamination-free, but not uncommon. They could be purchased from almost any industrial supply outfit. Van Lohr set about rounding up the cylinders. He would reseal the shockfoam and nobody would be the wiser. He grabbed a drifting cylinder — the mass was much less than he'd expected. A gas, maybe? He turned the cylinder over and, without thinking, read the label that was affixed to the smooth blue surface. The markings were quite simple: "R60M/9+ NEUROPHAGE," followed by the poison-green and entirely redundant biohazard symbol.

Namumatsu! The 'Phage! This was the most horrible bad joss! Moving very carefully, and trying to control his shaking hands, Van Lohr collected the cylinders, gently stowed them in the box and snapped the lid back in place. He secured the box under a tie-down and leaned against the cool, hard surface of the bulkhead, smelling the acrid odor of sweat that now stained his coverall. The damned 'Phage! It was almost unbelievable; the stuff wasn't even supposed to exist, except in the devastation that had been Callamoor VI, and it sure as hell shouldn't be on a FITS boat that was inbound to a populated world. The mere act of touching the cylinders had made Van Lohr feel corrupt and unclean. He wiped his hands against the legs of his coverall, wondering who might be responsible for this obscenity. He had carried some highly questionable cargoes, killed unknown numbers of living beings during strikes, and had even spent a week in transit with a Mort team, but the 'Phage! Compared to this foulness, the Morts had been candidates for sainthood.

R60M/9+ had been developed by the largest biomedical laboratory on Callamoor VI. The laboratory's goal had been benign, even praiseworthy: an attempt to design a virus that would combat a form of cancer of the central nervous system resistant to standard treatments. The result was disaster. When the laboratory's Level 9 seal system failed, the virus that was released was not the

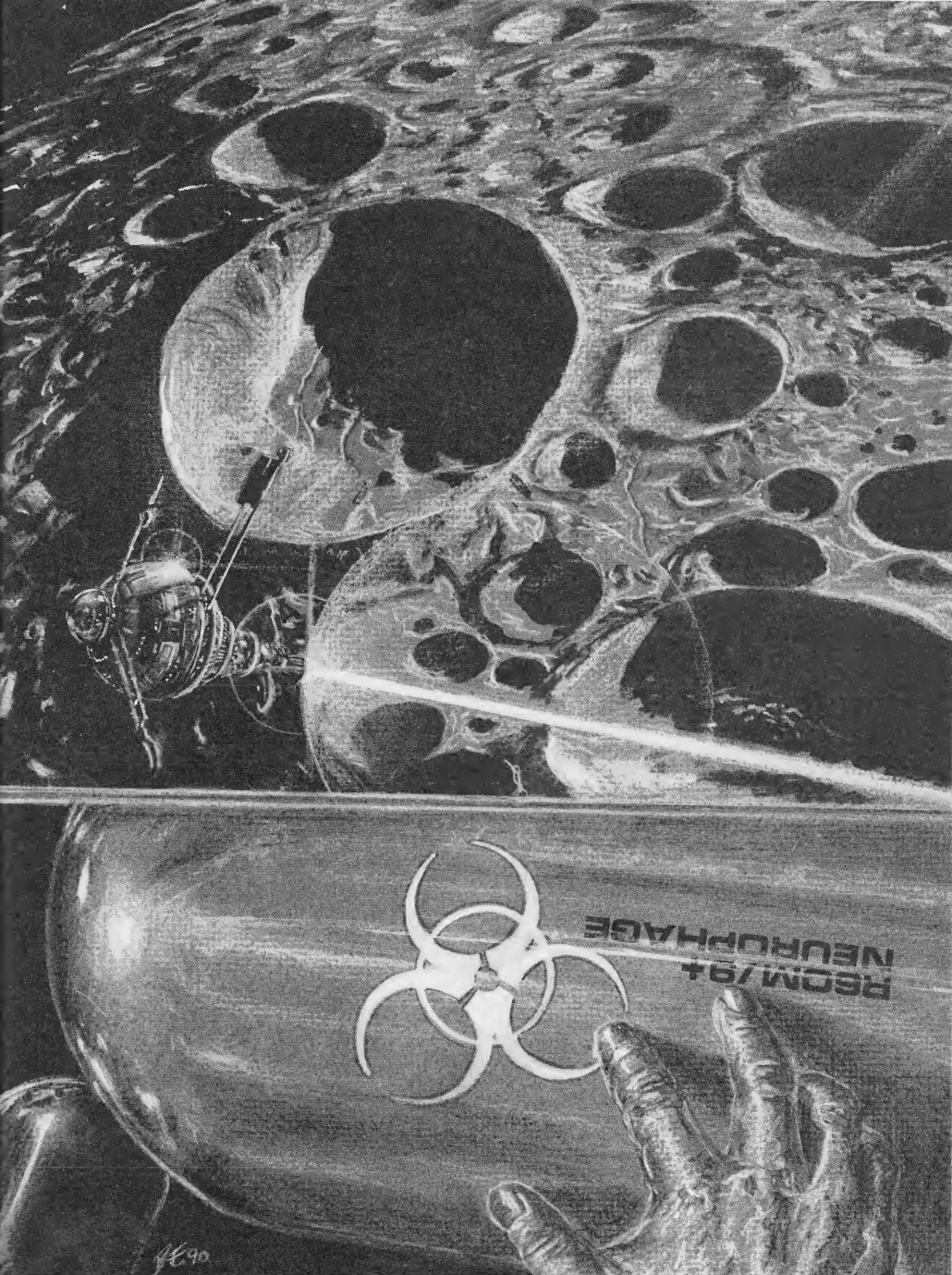
intended final product, but an early experiment. It would devour the cancer cells as designed, but it also had an appetite for other neural tissue, any neural tissue. It spread rapidly by any one of several vectors and could, because of its attendant nanomechanical compartment, exist for long periods without a host organism.

Van Lohr had seen robot-probe recordings of the neurophage's effects. The images made him sick, and gave him nightmares for a week. In theory, the neurophage killed by chewing its way up neural pathways until enough central-nervous-system tissue was destroyed to cause death. The reality was far worse. If no one was available to administer euthanasia, death came from eventual cardiac arrest or when convulsion-snapped bones ruptured major blood vessels. On average, the process took about three days, and the amphetamine-like waste products of the virus usually insured the victim was conscious until death. If there was a more degrading death, Van Lohr didn't want to know about it. There had been a young woman in one of the recordings ...

He shuddered at the memory and backed out of the cargo compartment, sealing the hatch behind him. Making his way forward, he climbed into the pilot's seat and loosely strapped in. Perhaps the labels were false, a blind to hide something else. On consideration, though, that didn't make sense. It would be like smuggling grenades in containers disguised as fusion bombs. He was tempted to jettison the damned stuff in a trajectory that would intersect New Melbourne's sun, but that was not the best idea. The very existence of the 'Phage meant power — serious power, plus influence and a disregard for life. If delivery was not made, then this power would surely become curious about Van Lohr. And a power that dealt in the 'Phage would make a terrible enemy.

He leaned forward in the seat and checked the navigation display. A plan of action was needed, and quickly. He was approaching a parking orbit, and it would soon be time to contact the dirtside agency that would handle the final stage of the delivery. Possibly there would be some help available there. While most operations were conducted through a series of cut-outs, with the various parties unaware of the others' identities, this run was different. He not only knew whom he was dealing with on the planet, but had devised the *haalaf* oil scheme with the willing aid of Jassine Keel, station manager for Adolph Orbital Transport. Jassine would be no more pleased with the 'Phage than he was but, like it or not, she was already involved with a mission that had suddenly become more than the simple and profitable operation they had planned.

Bad joss, he thought, rubbing the gold Eight Portent Symbols bracelet that encircled his left wrist above the titanium bioport implant. A successful mission would





mean that Morgan "Poppa" Fox, the head of Fox Interstellar Transport & Salvage, would be pleased, and Yancey Van Lohr, master pilot and one of Poppa's MisFITS, would be much richer. Not as rich as Poppa, maybe, but rich enough. And if the run went sour, well, that didn't bear thinking about.

Van Lohr had spent almost two weeks working on the *Rolling Calf's* hull, masking the harsh outlines of its laser turret and missile racks with layers of boron-epoxy sheeting. It would be very bad indeed if someone should discover that what was supposed to be an in-system courier was, in fact, an SA-46B fast attack boat, a ship that was definitely not cleared for civil use, and one that had no Commonwealth registration records — military or civil. With any luck at all, New Melbourne Approach would see *Rolling Calf* as exactly what it was disguised as: a fast courier boat inbound from Morton Bay with a cargo of sensitive data.

Computer cores! The small white shockfoam containers had each been marked with the legends "A4M COMPUTER CORE" and "PROP. LANTOS ENGR. SYS." Van Lohr had been certain that Lantos Engineering Systems was an actual Morton Bay-based company; for that matter, Lantos might even be part of the Fox business empire. He was equally certain that whoever had loaded the containers with the 'Phage had not told *Joshua Slocum's* supercargo or loaders about the actual contents.

Van Lohr programmed a thirty-second course correction burn, initiated the sequence, and felt the deep bass harmonic rumble of fusion engines through his seat cushion. *Rolling Calf's* systems seemed to be performing correctly, and Van Lohr leaned forward to reset the display. Catching sight of his reflection in the screen, he frowned. He would have to do something about that tattoo. Jass Keel had thought the Shaman's Cross pattern quite sophisticated; in fact, she had persuaded him (admittedly with the aid of a fair quantity of brandy) to have the thing scribed on his forehead. The damned woman had an evil sense of humor.

A few years back, she had been his copilot on the old *Ella Speed*. During their time together, they had become friends, and then casual lovers. When she was transferred to command her own ship, they remained friends and kept in touch through FITS message centers and occasional meetings. Their last meeting had been three weeks ago, during the planning stages for the New Melbourne mission. She told him about her promotion to a management job on New Melbourne, ruefully admitting that she had kept her proficiency up by flying a few missions in clunky orbital freighters. Van Lohr told her about the upcoming mission and his hoard of *haalaf* oil. They agreed on a fifty-fifty split; he had the goods and she had the contacts.

He had once talked with a medtech who claimed that *haalaf* oil, in the strict biomedical sense, was not a true aphrodisiac. The medtech had gone into a long explanation of neurochemical receptors, secondary sensory enhancement, and pleasure-center stimulation, while Van Lohr had smiled and half-listened to the lecture. The medtech had obviously never had a cubic centimeter or so of the warm oil applied to his skin by a willing sexual partner. *Haalaf* oil might not be an aphrodisiac in the scientific sense, but it certainly had all the traditional characteristics of one!

It was a natural product; it had never been syn-

thesized, and the plant from which it was extracted grew on only one planet in known space. Van Lohr had spent a year on that planet, flying a sub-orbital transport in support of Commonwealth-sponsored revolutionaries. The revolt had been successful, and the half-dozen blue cylinders that Van Lohr had stowed beneath the cargo compartment deck plates, carefully packed in foam and shielded by the main turret power cable housing, were the result of his friendship with a grateful guerrilla leader.

The oil was essentially harmless. Unless the user had a weak heart, the only after-effects were a slight dryness of the mouth and heightened touch sensitivity for a day or two. But in Van Lohr's view, the best feature of the oil was its illegal status on New Melbourne. The Neopuritans controlled the planet's government, and while *haalaf* oil was legal on many worlds, the Neos had strictly forbidden its import. This made it the ideal contraband: easily carried, highly desirable to potential customers, and excessively profitable.

It wasn't that Fox Interstellar Transport & Salvage lacked business; whatever the actual terms of the agreement between Morgan Fox and various Commonwealth authorities were, Van Lohr was sure that the old man was making money, plenty of money. And if Poppa Fox could use the situation to increase his already considerable wealth, then there was no reason that Van Lohr shouldn't profit, too. A MisFIT might be well paid in comparison to his or her counterparts in the Commonwealth military forces, but there were other considerations — such as a cargo bay full of the 'Phage.

And it was more than just transport runs. Van Lohr had flown a dozen strike missions, some against R'Kaal bases and some deep inside the space of neutral systems. If it was a dangerous way to make a living, it was also a way to fly some hot machines while avoiding the discipline, bureaucracy, and general military chickenshit of the regular forces. MisFITS flew their missions, kept their mouths shut, and got paid. Any deals you could work on the side, so long as the mission wasn't jeopardized, were your own business. This suited Van Lohr perfectly.

He switched the nav system to "auto" and loaded the braking program that would establish a parking orbit. When he was satisfied that the setup was correct, he unstrapped and stripped off his coverall. He stuffed the sweatstained garment into a seat pocket, opened the cockpit locker and began to put on the acceleration and induction gear that would make him a part of *Rolling Calf*. Suit line ... helmet make ... acceleration suit ... catheter line ... boots ... bioleads ... gloves ... restraint straps ... He put on the LINC helmet and hit the switch for the neural induction field. The nav display imposed itself on his visual center, and the cold, slick feel of the acceleration suit disappeared as the field's kinesthetic overrides damped physical sensation. He switched to a tactical overlay. The neon-pink laser boresight ring appeared and on a sidebar, six green pips displayed missile status.

Van Lohr armed the charges that would blow the masking panels clear of the outer hull. It had occurred to him that anyone who would deal in the 'Phage might also be prepared to insure the security of his or her operations by eliminating potential witnesses or leaks. If this proved to be the case, he and *Rolling Calf* would be ready to give them a nasty surprise.

The braking program cut in, giving him a brief pres-



sure spike as the suit compensated for the acceleration. He switched to a high-frequency transmitter and sent the coded message that would alert Jassine Keel for the pickup. Adolph Orbital Transport's ships were based on the ring of highport stations that orbited New Melbourne; it wouldn't take her long to launch. He watched the string of symbols flow across the display. If someone other than Jass should intercept the transmission, it would look like a routine request for a shuttle. As soon as he had confirmation, he would ... and there it was. The clear text scrolled across the display, confirming his rendezvous request:

"ADOLPH NM336K CONFIRM RDZ 1845 LOCAL ORBIT L-72R BEACON CODE 2500 MODE C."

Van Lohr selected the requested code and turned on the transporter that would supply Jass's ship with navigation data for rendezvous. He checked the timelog: only twenty minutes to linkup — nice work! Jass might be a big-time dirtside manager these days, but it looked like she was still a hot pilot. He brought up a sensor display and selected a track-and-warn program that would alert him when her ship was within 200 kilometers. Switching to an internal systems checklist, he let the boat's computer search through the files until he found what he was looking for. Even with its limited computer capacity, *Rolling Calf* still had capabilities other than speed and weapons, capabilities that might provide an advantage should something go wrong.

When the flashing red marker for the proximity alarm lit, he was already tracking the orbital freighter, watching the pulse beat of the decreasing range of numbers and

holding the transport's image steady in the center of the laser-ring sight. Optics showed brief blue-white flares from docking thrusters as the freighter braked and maneuvered into contact position. He switched on the director lights that outlined the main hatch, sent the "CLEAR TO ENGAGE" signal, and extended the docking collar. From this point on, the linkup was the freighter pilot's responsibility; all he had to do was watch the autopilot program hold *Rolling Calf* steady in its orbital path.

A few minutes later, there was a slight vibration in the boat's hull, and the display showed a few degrees shift in heading. The main hatch pressure indicator turned from red to green. Very smooth; he wouldn't be able to give Jass any grief about letting her piloting techniques get rusty. Van Lohr killed the induction field, hit the restraint release, and pulled the straps clear of the seat. He heard the deck hatch behind his seat begin to open and checked the airtlock pressure again. Adolph Orbital's ships used a single-lock hatch system; it was a new design and quite fast in operation, but Van Lohr didn't entirely trust it. The light was still green, so he unlocked the neck seal and pulled off his helmet, stowing it on the side console rack. He turned in the seat:

"Yo, Jass! What took you so long, partner? I've been waiting..."

The figure that came through the hatch was wearing a gloss-white contamination suit. Van Lohr saw his own surprise reflected in the suit's silver faceplate, and before he could reach for the manual hatch switch, the figure raised a large-bore pistol and shot him in the chest.

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There was something very wrong, Van Lohr thought, with a hell where the demons tied you up in the dark and gently rubbed your neck. If he could just get his arms free, he'd give those bastards a real fight. He struggled against the restraints and managed to get his right arm loose. Ha! He swung blindly and hit something that was firm, but yielding.

"Ow! Damn it, Yancey! Watch what you're doin'!"

He opened his eyes. Jass Keel! She was floating above him, one hand holding a tie-down ring and the other rubbing her shoulder. She let go of the ring and began to undo the cargo straps that held him to the deck plates. Pieces of shockfoam containers drifted lazily in the dim red light, and she brushed them aside as she released the last strap.

"Hit you with a voltgun. Guess your suit took most of the charge, or you'd still be out. Strapped you down 'cause I didn't wanna get mashed by your hulk driftin' around in here. Got your brain workin' yet?"

"Yeah ... mostly. What happened?"

She shook her head. "Not sure, 'cept cover's blown all to hell — yours an' mine." She glared at him. "Leak's at your end, buddy, my operation's tight. Three of 'em — full contam suits an' lock override gear — boarded me just before launch."

"Who ..."

"Didn't say, but they got th' stink of Neo Internal Security on 'em." She shook her head again. "Two of 'em gotta be pilots; they're gonna fly th' ships after you an' me have a little 'accident' with th' 'Phage. Jesu! Th' bastards knew what they were lookin' for; even showed me th' damn containers. We're in th' deep kimchee now, partner."

Van Lohr worked a finger under the neck seal of his suit. With no coolant flow, it was getting a little warm.

"They're not going to fly this boat anywhere unless they've got a couple of days to rewire the engine igniter circuits. I put a kink in the computer. Hmmm ... get me a number four driver off that tool rack behind you ..."

When the cargo hatch opened, Van Lohr squinted against the brighter light from the cockpit that flooded the compartment. He rubbed his bracelet, and then carefully adjusted the chest seal of the acceleration suit.

"Out of there, Van Lohr, nice and slow."

Van Lohr stuck his head out of the hatch. Before he could pull himself through, he was grabbed by the collar and jerked roughly into the cockpit. A cold, hard object was shoved under his jaw. He was pulled toward the pilot seat, still held tightly by the collar. He twisted in midair, and was pushed into the seat.

"Get the burners lit, MisFIT. You try any tricks an' I'll cook your fuckin' brains."

Slowly, Van Lohr turned his head. The pressure under his jaw was transferred to the base of his skull. In the reflection from the cockpit display, he could see that although the man was still suited, he had removed his helmet. Ah, very good joss. Moving carefully, he connected the restraint harness, leaving the straps slack.

"Guess I don't have much choice," he said mildly.

"You got it, MisFIT. Do it — now!"

"OK. Look, I've got to hook up my 'leads; boat's programmed so it won't start unless I'm wired into the system." Van Lohr seated the wrist bioleads in his sockets and picked up the throat connection. He inserted the

fitting and moved his hand to the suit chest seal, sliding out a bright blue cylinder.

"Here's some neurophage you missed, asshole." Van Lohr said as he popped the cylinder's pressure seal.

The man gave a startled cry, dropped his pistol, and executed a perfect dive through the open deck hatch. As he disappeared from view, Van Lohr threw the cylinder after him and slapped the hatch switch. The hatch closed with a solid "clang" and he yanked the red T-handle on the overhead panel, blowing the docking collar. He grabbed the induction helmet and jammed it on.

The display showed the orbital freighter, boosting toward a lower orbit in a halo of fusion flame. He punched the igniters, and the image wavered as *Rolling Calf's* engines responded. Little too close for a missile shot ... ah, what the hell ... He fired the shaped charges, freeing the turret and missile racks, brought the power up and switched to laser ranging. *Rolling Calf* was moving at full boost when the target steadied in the ring sight and the "LASER LOCK" light appeared.

Van Lohr took the transport with a classic angle-off pass. The ship tried to maneuver, but an orbital freighter was no match for an attack boat. The laser cannon blew it apart in a hot orange sphere of expanding fuel, atmosphere, and wreckage. He slammed *Rolling Calf* into a six-G barrel roll, dodging a larger section of the wreck. Re-entry heat would finish the job. Across his LINC display, New Melbourne Control protested "maneuvers unauthorized in parking orbit."

Van Lohr shut off the protests and laid a course away from the planet, dropping thrust to a sedate one G. He set the autopilot and began to unstrap, hoping that Jass Keel had ridden out the attack without serious damage. Shit! He'd completely forgotten her ...

As soon as he opened the hatch, he knew she was still alive:

"... crazy-ass fighter pilot! Like to break my damn neck ..."

"Hey, take it easy, Jass." Van Lohr began to release the cargo straps that held her. The side of her face was swollen; she was going to have an impressive black eye. "A few bruises is better than being eaten by the 'Phage, partner."

"Yeah. Guess you're right." She sat up and rubbed the back of her neck. "What about my ship?"

"Crispy critters," Van Lohr said, smiling.

"Figures. So what's th' plan, smart boy? There's gonna be some real unhappy people lookin' for us, an' you sure aren't gonna dock anywhere in this system without a whole bunch of trouble."

"We don't dock. Another fifty hours at one G, give or take a few, and we'll meet *Josh Slocum* at the pickup point. I expect that'll be enough time for a couple of smart MisFITS like us to come up with an idea or two."

"Huh. Won't take me that long. You got a deck of cards on this tub, Yancey? Might convince me t' give you a poker lesson, 'less you're flat broke again."

"Sorry," he said. "No cards." Reaching into his suit, he pulled out another small blue cylinder. "I expect we can find something to pass the time," he said, handing it to her. □







# Nectar

By Ann K. Schwader

Art by Cortney Skinner

Even from the doorway, a honey-sweet stink left no doubt they'd found the right address. Shutting the apartment door behind her, Capt. Marcella Cooper grimaced. Third nectar death in the city this week alone. Didn't the upwardly mobile ever learn?

Beside her, Lt. Hamlin already had his electronic pad out, punching in notes. Ambitious kid. Her job as head of DenMetro's NARC task force probably looked good to him. Well, he was welcome to it — when she made regional or national director. Till then, she had no intention of stepping aside, gracefully or otherwise.

"Captain Cooper, Ma'am?"

Oh, God. A rookie. As the youngest of three local uniforms on the scene approached, she forced a smile. Never mind how she hated being called "Ma'am," or how old it made her feel.

This was *her* case now.

"Victim's name was Karyn Sexton," the rookie continued. "A vidnews anchor, Channel 9. When she didn't show for her noon broadcast, the station called in."

Cooper nodded, unsurprised. Nectar was expensive, exotic, rewarding ... and barely illegal. A lot of big-ticket employers just figured on their people using it. Some even used it themselves, and nobody called the cops until something happened.

Stepping carefully around the sprawled body of Karyn Sexton, she tapped notes into her own pad. The victim was dressed to go on-screen, a fall of platinum hair almost hiding the broken nectar vial beside her hand. Like most she'd seen, it was a luxury item in its own right: cut crystal with a semiprecious stopper. The thick golden liquid inside was already evaporating.

Cooper pulled an evidence bag from her belt pack and worked the vial into it, frowning. Another sample for the local lab, when the *national* ones hadn't cracked nectar's chemical formula yet — or even figured out how it was made. Eighteen months since the stuff had first shown up in California, six months since the deaths started.

Policing America's first extraterrestrial drug was hell. "Ready to call Autopsy, Captain?"

She barely nodded as two local uniforms started bagging the body. Like samples, autopsies were a technicality. Nectar droppers died from one thing: ruptured aneurysms in the brain. Sexton'd been lucky. She hadn't gone psychoviolent first, the way a lot of them did.

As the last strand of custom-tinted platinum hair slid into plastic, Cooper sighed. Droppers were nuts, every last corporate ladder-climbing, terminally ambitious one of them. So long as nectar gave them what they needed, they'd keep telling themselves the deaths only happened sometimes, to some people who couldn't "handle the strain." Nectar was the latest fast-lane gamble: heightened productivity/thought speed/energy for a price that might never be paid.

But it always was, within an estimated one year after that first golden drop.

"Started the message search yet, Hamlin?" she asked. "Just starting."

Watching him sort a pile of papers and hardcopy he'd collected, Cooper felt her breath catch. Messages about (or maybe *from*) the Voices were the only solid clue NARC ever got. Not that they proved anything, exactly.

Or if they did, she didn't like what.

Since the first nectar deaths, a few victims had left notes — warnings, mostly — about Voices. These were actually aliens, they claimed; alien beings now living somewhere in this country who spoke in droppers' heads to issue instructions. Their motives were unclear, but most of the so-called "instructions" didn't make sense. Why should extraterrestrials care whether certain stocks were purchased that day, or how a media event got reported?

Still, droppers did what the Voices told them. Or they died.

"Nothing in this mess, Captain." Stacking the pile neatly, Hamlin shrugged. "Sometimes I think those 'messages' are just drug dreams, y'know?"

Fighting an involuntary shudder, Cooper nodded.

"Let's hope so. Keep checking in here; I'll do the bedroom."

Aside from a few rather imaginative pleasure toys, she found nothing. The connecting bathroom might be more productive: droppers often stashed their supply along with aspirin and y-cream. Touching her face, Cooper knew she could use some. It wasn't past noon yet, but her skin already felt old.

The sink mirror showed fine lines around her green eyes, loose skin unhidden by her carefully maintained dark hair. When the media arrived (and they would), she'd look like Hamlin's mother — not a vital officer with years of promotions still ahead. On a shelf of jars and tubes above the toilet, she found what she needed. The cool white cream absorbed almost immediately, smoothing her age back to the 40 she passed for.

Cooper replaced the jar, smiling. By whatever brand name, y-cream was the greatest anti-aging tactic since kicking off young.

"Captain, we've got something!"

Hamlin and one of the uniforms sat on the living room couch, a large address book between them. Inside the book was a folded paper, which Hamlin handed to her.

"Guest list," he explained. "The party's set for next Thursday, starting at 1 a.m."

Cooper nodded. Droppers didn't sleep much, but they did put in a lot of overtime.

"We'll run this through Metro Central. Might confirm a few names in our suspects file, at least. I suppose she's got phone numbers for them all?"

"Looks like it." Hamlin riffled pages. "Anybody in particular?"



Cooper barely heard. Across the room, Sexton's wall phone had its autodirectory light on, showing a name and number half-fallen. The phone hung directly above where her body had fallen.

"Hari F.," she read from the glowing diodes. "H - A - R - I, last initial F. Match anybody on her list?"

"Doesn't look like it."

On a hunch, Cooper punched the three numbers still green-lit beside Hari's name. Gray snow filled the phone's video screen: no answer.

*Damn.*

Copying the entire number into her pad, she felt a headache coming on. Whoever Hari F. was, Sexton had died trying to reach him. Would've been nice to have one concrete lead for this afternoon's citywide task-force meeting ...

Hamlin cleared his throat behind her.

"Anything else we need to get, Captain? We're due downtown in twenty minutes."

"I know," she replied, not bothering to check her watch. Hamlin was at least two of the ten most efficient people she'd ever met. If he *didn't* want her job, he was putting up one hell of a front.

"Go ahead and finish up here," she told the uniforms still hanging around. "I'll want the autopsy results downtown as soon as possible — and any prelim analysis of that sample I took."

Their assurances eased the pain in her skull a little, but not enough. One mystery beats three yes-men any day, and there were still the widvews waiting outside.

**B**y late afternoon, the headache was a screamer. Slipping fingertips under her cap-cut hair, she massaged her temples while trying to explain the month's worst body count. Nectar Arrests & Research Cadre meetings were never exactly uplifting, but this week's DOA stats made her wonder what life would be like in Traffic Div.

She wasn't alone.

"Eighteen in one lousy suburb!" a group leader complained. "You'd think folks smart enough to get rich'd be smart enough to stay off this stuff."

*Some cops aren't.* Cooper bit her lip. There'd been rumors about the NYPD ... but nothing here. Nothing yet.

"How many of them psycho?" she asked.

"Fifteen." The suburban officer groaned. "Hey, I know it's worse in L.A. and Chicago, but it won't be for long."

An exhausted-looking young woman from one of DenMetro's most exclusive areas nodded. "What's worse, nobody'll give us the truth. Twelve DOAs this week, and friends of three of them swore they'd never dropped nectar — even after I showed the autopsy reports."

Several others murmured agreement. Cooper frowned. "Wasn't there nectar on the scene?"

"Not in those three cases." The young woman spread her hands. "That's the problem. Some aren't carrying the stuff in designer vials, now; and God alone knows where they hide it at home. Too bad dogs can't sniff nectar."

Murmurs started again as Cooper felt her stomach clench. Where there was a nectar death, there had to be nectar. Either droppers were getting too clever ... or her task force was getting sloppy.

Minutes later, a rookie brought the prelims of Karyn Sexton's autopsy. As she paged through, her frown

deepened.

"Any surprises, Captain?" Hamlin asked.

"Not really. Just an explosive aneurysm, the usual."

The lieutenant's dark young face clouded. "I thought the Voices only 'pushed' a vessel to rupture when a victim fought somehow. Sexton didn't psych, didn't even leave a note ..."

"Don't you think I know that?"

Her response was sharper than she'd intended. Before Hamlin could notice — or worse, blame it on her headache — Cooper turned to the others.

"You've all read the Sexton report. Any ideas what she might have been fighting to do? Or not do?"

Amid their confused suggestions, she felt a chill. Cops were trained for a lot of things, but not second-guessing hostile aliens. Hell, nobody'd even seen one. Smart money said the Voices were somewhere in California — the Sierra Madres, maybe — but NARC forces there still hadn't managed to flush them out.

Assuming they had bodies to flush out.

An officer from Metro Central held up Sexton's party list. "At least we know who this wasn't part of it. Plenty of droppers invited, but not your 'Hari F.' His number's unlisted, but we traced it — turns out he's a big-ticket defense lawyer. Hari Franc."

"Current case?" Cooper asked.

"None. He's got a client up on racketeering charges — you know the type — with the trial starting next week. Probably still preparing."

Cooper's temples throbbed. Droppers befriended other droppers, but Hari Franc *had* to be clean. Even though possession was a misdemeanor, no trial lawyer'd risk an arrest. It could ruin a very profitable career.

Yet Sexton had tried to call him, and died for it. Why?

Calling the meeting to some semblance of order, she asked everyone. Their suggestions were even wilder than before, ranging from a secret affair to the possibility of the Voices wanting legal advice.

Somewhere above the chaos, the room's wall phone buzzed.

"Mind getting that?" she mouthed to Hamlin.

With annoying efficiency, he'd already started to. Cooper watched his face change as he took the call, finally turning back to her with a grim smile.

"It's Metro Southwest," he said, straining to be heard.

"There's a possible nectar incident in progress — window sniper firing at traffic. Address checks out as the office of one Hari Franc."

She was halfway to the door before he hung up.

**W**ish you could've gotten here sooner, Captain." A SWAT officer outside the building swabbed his forehead with one sleeve, revealing a bloody graze. "We needed the help."

Touching the FA 454 'Coilless strapped to her thigh, Cooper cursed silently. High-tech riot carbines were no match for DenMetro's rush hour. Leaving Hamlin to explain, she headed upstairs to Hari Franc's luxury office suite and slipped inside.

The scene was familiar, but nobody ever really got used to it. Bullet-holes marred the Italian leather furniture. A top massive oak desk, Franc's portable computer leaked wiring and chips from a shattered screen. The spreading chest-sized blotch on a bodysheet across the

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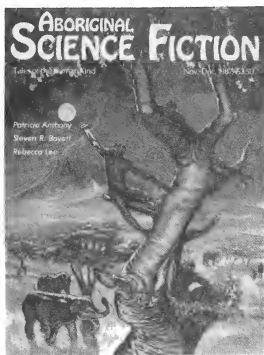
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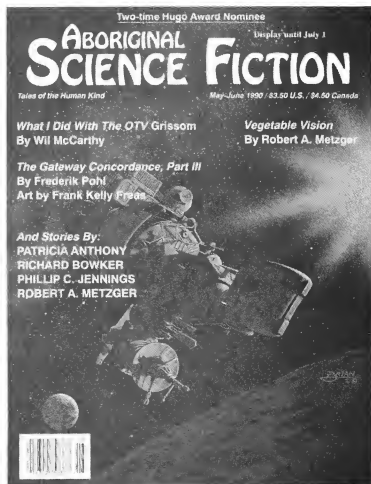


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room was leaking something else.

Outside on the balcony, two SWAT types stood looking down. One clutched an expensive sport rifle in his gloved hands.

"The guy bought a scope an' everything," he told her. "Must've been halfway gone for at least a few days. Started shooting at traffic around 4:30 ... damn accurate, too."

Cooper glanced over the railing. Nectar psychos usually targeted two things: luxury vehicles and police cruisers. There were a couple of each waiting for a tow, plus a harried ambulance crew.

"How many casualties?" she asked.

"Six. Two dead; one of the others on full life support."

*Typical dropper exit.* She turned away, disgusted. So long as lawmakers wasted time trying to *define* nectar rather than making possession a felony, high-rent death and mayhem were going to go on.

Sometimes she wondered how many of them dropped it.

Hamlin was already directing the search inside. Taking over from him, Cooper sniffed the air and frowned. No honey-sick sweetness, just gunpowder and blood. Franc hadn't made their job as easy as Karyn Sexton had. Stood to reason, him being a defense attorney ... but there had to be a vial or two around.

"There's a built-in fridge by the desk," she told Hamlin. "Check that out, and the bathroom. Maybe he hid it in a jar or something."

Pulling a small flashlight from her belt, she went over the desk herself. Then the bookshelves. Then a few of the books. By the time she finished, it was getting dark, and nothing had turned up.

Hamlin looked gray around the edges.

"Captain," he said quietly, "what if there *isn't* any?"

"There has to be," she replied, ignoring her own nagging doubts. "If droppers are getting smart, we've got to get smarter. Maybe they're dumping it in their drinks, or lacing their food with it. I want everything out of the fridge, the bathroom, and the bar."

Her lieutenant nodded. "I'll call Central. They'll need extras in Analysis tonight."

"I'll start with the bathroom."

Like everything else in Franc's suite, it was next year's model. Sink and plumbing molded to the wall as a single unit, storage cabinets seemed to hang in space, and she wasn't sure at all how the toilet worked. Only a large jar of y-cream perched on the edge of the sink was readily recognizable.

Cooper opened it with gloves: almost empty. As she dropped the jar into an evidence bag, she found herself smiling. Y-cream was everybody's dirty little secret these days, or at least everybody's who could afford it. Expensive, but it worked. Should've been patented years ago, instead of only last year ...

"Autopsy's here for the body. OK to move it?"

Caught with the jar in her hands, she felt vaguely embarrassed. Hamlin didn't use the stuff — but he wasn't pushing the wrong side of fifty, either. Or feeling young competition breathing down his plainclothes collar.

"Sure, but tell them I want the cause of death tonight. Was it nectar or wasn't it?" Her headache threatened to return. "I'll need the analysis results, too."

"You'll probably get a wake-up call," Hamlin warned.

"I'm *expecting* one, Lieutenant."

Squinting through after-shower steam, Cooper still felt as foggy as the bathroom mirror. She'd set her alarm for a whole three hours' sleep, which should've been plenty under the circumstances.

It wasn't.

If she wanted to be awake for the autopsy results, she'd better keep trying. Touching a button over the sink, she defogged the mirror and started her grooming routine. Sloppy cops did sloppy work.

The day's two nectar deaths still preyed on her mind — which was normal, though her inability to concentrate wasn't. All solutions depended on details, and details tended to fall into place while she slept. Her first waking hour was often her best case-cracking one. Had she underestimated her own exhaustion?

While her thoughts chased themselves in circles, her hands stayed busy. Reaching for the y-cream jar, they opened it and scooped a healthy amount onto her fingertips. Her face in the mirror was pale and lined, but soon wrinkles were fading along with the raccoon circles under her eyes. The ads were right: she'd never want to be without this stuff again.

*When I look better, I'll feel better.*

The thought annoyed her, though she continued her routine. Vanity wasn't her style. Wasn't even the reason she'd started using y-cream, though the harsh lights the vidcraws were using lately didn't help.

*Look better. Feel better.*

Her fingertips froze in mid-swipe. Was this persistent thought really hers? For a moment, it hadn't even *sounded* like her. If this was what she got for going without proper sleep ...

She'd almost managed to make herself believe it when the phone buzzed. Stumbling through her dark living room, she was halfway to it when a wave of grogginess swamped her.

*Why bother? Go back to sleep.*

The words were even less hers than before. Clutching a chair back, she struggled to breathe against sudden fear. Five minutes ago, she'd barely been conscious. Fully awake, she was thinking no better. Grogginess faded as she groped toward the phone again, one piece of furniture at a time. What the hell was wrong with her, anyhow?

Punching Screen Off, she finally managed to answer.

"Captain Cooper?"

Hamlin's voice, wide awake and excited. Autopsy results. Though they'd found no nectar vials in Hari Franc's office, his brain showed the same telltale damage Karyn Sexton's had. They'd know more when the regional neurologist showed up later this morning.

"Let me get this straight, Lieutenant. Franc had all the symptoms, but he wasn't dropping nectar?"

Cotton fog was rolling into her ears, her mind. Facts and conclusions drifted apart, losing each other in the mist. Cooper's nails dug into her palms. *You're a cop, dammit. Think like one!*

Loud and authentic as the thought was, she barely heard herself.

"That's right, Captain." Sound of rattling papers: Hamlin still efficient at the edge of the cloudbank. "I couldn't understand it either, until those substance analyses you ordered came in. Turns out Franc's y-cream was loaded

with nectar. Couldn't smell it or see it, but there it was."  
*Absorbs in seconds. Penetrates completely.*

She stared at her hands — her soft, youthful hands — as the fog ripped away. Of course Sexton had known. The Voices told her. When it was already too late for her or "Hari F.," they'd told her, and Sexton had died trying to warn a friend.

The key to human control was human desire. Whatever else the Voices wanted, they wanted control — of the decision-makers, the up-and-coming. If one method failed, they'd devise others. They'd give their targets what they wanted most, make them pay for it, then take it all back in the end.

"Hamlin," she managed through a tight throat, "listen. We've got to..."

"Get on it immediately? No problem. I've already got the coroner waiting for us downtown. I'll pick you up on the way."

Then only a dial tone came.

Choking back panic, Cooper wrapped both hands around the phone to steady herself. Five minutes. Hamlin lived five minutes away — perhaps fewer this late at night. Got to hang on that much longer, tell him in person what nobody believed written down.

*He won't believe you, either.*

The Voices were a tangible presence, fingers of gray gripping her mind. *Four minutes.* Releasing the telephone, she headed for the .454 'Coiless in its rack by the door. *Three minutes.* Better be ready to take herself out if she started slipping. *Two minutes.* Gray digits tightening, tightening ...

Door buzzer. Salvation.

A hand she scarcely recognized as her own flipped the security latches. Hamlin stepped inside, riot carbine at the ready.

Even through the Voices' rising chorus, something was wrong.

"Lieutenant, what the hell ...?"

As she grappled for the weapon and lost, she heard crystal breaking. Seeping from Hamlin's jacket, sweet honey filled her nostrils all the way down. □

## Moving?

If you plan to move, please let us know at least 45 days in advance of the mailing of the next issue of *Aboriginal Science Fiction* to make sure you don't miss any issues. That may seem awfully far in advance, but it takes about 45 days between the time we ship the mailing labels and the magazine's arrival at your home. For the May-June 1991 issue, we need to know if you are moving by February 15, 1991. Thanks.

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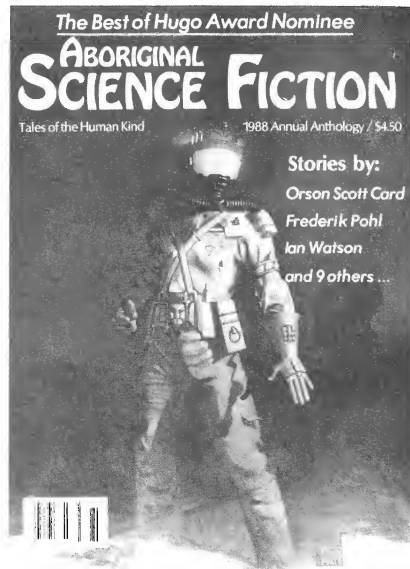
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# The Cubist and the Madman

By Robert A. Metzger

By Larry Blamire

## *Personal Notes of Dr. Lyle Thaddius*

Accepted a new patient named Juan Gris. Have only talked to him by phone. Insists that he cannot come to the office, since he *cannot* leave his house.

He is willing to pay triple my normal fee for house call.

Obviously agoraphobic but, in addition, seemed to be suffering from both temporal and spatial disorientation — had great difficulty in telling me just where he lived, and when he wanted to see me. Note: agreed to pay for five sessions in advance.

He *believes* that in five sessions he can be *cured* of his problem.

Obviously delusional, quite possibly schizophrenic.

Schedule for Tuesdays at 3:00.

## *Excerpts from Session 1*

I've lost my way." Dr. Thaddius nodded. He listened to the words, but didn't attach any real significance to them. Years of experience had taught him that words rarely meant anything — and especially not at a first session. Dr. Thaddius had built a career on his ability to read patients by their covers. The covers were what told the real stories — everything else, everything inside, was just words. And word, meant lies — the lies you'd tell the world and, more important, the lies you'd tell yourself.

Dr. Thaddius was in search of the truth.

So he stared past Juan Gris.

He looked at the living room.

This was part of Gris's cover — a very major part.

The room was an immense cavern — a cavern that at one time had been the fashionable sitting room of an Eastside brownstone. Dr. Thaddius was certain that it had once been a place of velvet drapes, Persian carpets, warmed brandy snifters, and the stuffed corpses of anything that once galloped across an African savanna.

That was all gone.

Even its echo was dead.

What filled this place now had been touched by insanity, stained with something that had been twisted past anything recognizable as being human. It was the home of a *madman*. The place was a cavern whose walls were covered in shattered mirrors. Infinite reflections filled the place, all of them cracked, all of them splintered.

But the mirrors were almost invisible.

It was what they reflected that filled the room.

*Colors.*

Paintings hung down from the ceiling, supported by nearly invisible wires. Each canvas was splattered with a nightmare, a slash of rainbow color, angular and savage, filled with images of people and places, distorted and twisted, as if shredded by surgical steel and then reassembled by a blind person.

Something hot and sharp jabbed behind Dr. Thaddius'

eyes — something that, just for a moment, felt like a surgeon's scalpel.

He looked away from the colors, from the shattered landscapes and people, but, more important, away from his *own* reflected image, one that was just as broken and twisted as any of those that filled the paintings. The surgeon's knife vanished.

But the memory of the pain lingered.

He looked at Juan Gris.

He sat on a paint-splattered three-legged stool, one almost identical to the one that Dr. Thaddius sat on. The little man was ancient, possibly one hundred years old, possibly even more; yet there was an ageless quality to him — as if he'd fought his battle with time, and the fight had been declared a draw. Dr. Thaddius had never seen anything so ravaged by time, yet still alive. The old man looked like an over-wrinkled raisin that had been stuffed into a paint-splattered artist's smock. But his hands were young, that part of him seeming filled with life. His fingers were long and tapered, and stained the colors of a rainbow.

The fingers floated up, touching the wire rims of his first pair of glasses. He wore *two* pairs.

The first looked as if the lenses had been hacked from the bottoms of ketchup bottles. They magnified every broken blood vessel and yellow splotch in his cataract-hazed eyes. But it was the second pair, the pair that Dr. Thaddius could only get a glimpse of when the old man turned his head, that most fascinated him. Juan Gris wore them on the *back* of his head, held fixed by thick strands of black electrical tape that were wrapped around his ears.

They were *mirrored* sunglasses.

As Dr. Thaddius wondered what Juan Gris could be hiding behind those mirrored lenses, he felt something itch deep within his head, something that hadn't itched for years. He found himself curious — actually interested.

And for just a moment, that frightened him.

But he buried the fear.

Years of practice had taught him that skill.

"Could you elaborate on that?" asked Dr. Thaddius, the phrase coming effortlessly, with Pavlovian ease. "Just how have you become lost?" He stared at the deep, paint-filled creases in Juan Gris's face, and at his yellowed, almost brown, teeth.

"Directions change. North won't stay north. It twists and turns. North can become south, south can become east." He blinked his eyes and pushed his ketchup-bottle glasses up the bridge of his prune-like nose. "But sometimes north becomes *up*, or even *left*. Once it even became *blue*." He smiled, and the tips of his nose and chin almost touched. Reaching within the folds of his smock, he pulled





Flaming 89





Larry Blamire  
1989

out what looked like a capless tube of toothpaste. "It was wonderful," he said in a dreamy-sounding whisper as he squeezed the toothpaste tube and covered his bare feet with glistening aqua-blue coils. He stared down at his feet and wiggled his toes.

"Does north ever become *right*?" asked Dr. Thaddius as he gave his most sympathetic psychiatrist smile, hoping to draw the old man out before he drifted away in some toothpaste-generated fantasy.

Gris jerked his head back up. The joints in his neck crackled. He blinked, and his eyes narrowed to slits. The rosy-blue veins in his forehead pulsed. "Never," he said.

Dr. Thaddius just nodded.

"Is that why you've asked me here, to help you regain your sense of direction, so you can find your way outside this house, so you can go back out into the world?" Dr. Thaddius turned on his stool, and swept his hand in the direction of the door.

The door was no longer there.

He found himself looking at a distorted and splintered image of himself being reflected back from a canvas that was filled with a woman who was nothing more than icicle-like burning hair and a wide screaming mouth filled with a cracked mirror. For just a moment, the barest fraction of a second, he could no longer feel the stool beneath him, but he felt himself falling, actually vanishing, into the mirrored darkness of the screaming woman's mouth.

He blinked.

The stool was once again beneath him, and he could see the door just past the painting of the screaming woman.

He'd become disoriented.

But only for a moment.

Living in this house, in this place full of splattered paint and cracked mirrors, he suddenly realized just how easily the old man could have lost his sense of direction. He'd been here for less than an hour, and had almost become *lost* himself.

"Directions are of no consequence."

Dr. Thaddius turned back around.

Juan Gris pulled at the flabby skin of his cheeks. "Directions aren't a matter of concern. Directions are an artifact of the human mind. If humans didn't exist, directions wouldn't exist. I have to see beyond directions, to transcend a world that is masked by the human sense of self. I have to see the world for what it really is, not just the flickering shadows that my mind tries to convince me are the *true* reality. That is why I've called you. You will show me how to do that. You know the pathway."

Dr. Thaddius felt his heart race and the surgeon's scalpel being reinserted into his head. His eyeballs bulged outward as his blood pressure soared. "What makes you believe that I will be able to show you this pathway, to help you *transcend* what it is to be human?" he managed to ask. His voice had actually cracked and squealed, sounding as if it had come from some old static-filled radio.

Gris blinked. His lips twitched. "Because you're the mathematician who once walked that path."

Something reached into Dr. Thaddius's gut, something with taloned claws and, grabbing a fistful of intestines, twisted and tore them out. He *had* been a mathematician. But that had been a lifetime away, a world away. And he wouldn't return to that world — couldn't return to that

world.

He stood.

Closing his eyes, he walked toward the door.

He couldn't risk opening them, couldn't risk what he might see staring back at him from a shattered mirror.

### *Personal Notes of Dr. Lyle Thaddius*

I should have known.

You can't hide from the past. I tell my patients that, tell them that the only way to face the future is to understand the past.

*Physician, heal thyself.*

The past has found me.

Yesterday the name of Juan Gris meant nothing. And that's because I'd buried it, buried it deep. And when I met the old man, of course I didn't recognize him. I'd never actually seen his *face* before. What I'd once seen, years ago, had been what *he'd* seen, the way that *he'd* viewed the world.

I'd seen his art.

I'd collected his lithographs.

But all that was a lifetime ago.

Juan Gris *was* a Cubist painter, a contemporary of Picasso. His paintings still lived, but the man himself had *supposedly* died almost seventy years ago. If he were in fact still alive, he would be more than a hundred years old now. The old man I saw yesterday must have been more than a hundred years old. Does that make them one and the same? I don't know. Gris was the *purest* of the Cubists. Before becoming a painter he was trained as an engineer and *mathematician*. He attempted to view the world from a mathematical perspective, from a perspective that wasn't touched by the human mind.

Did he really not die?

It doesn't matter.

Only one thing matters.

This Juan Gris knows *my* past, a past that no one should know — a past that even I managed to forget — almost. I should not go back and see him. But I know I will. He opens me up to my old memories, unseals my past. And now that I've tasted it once again, seen the distorted mirrors, I can't turn my back on him.

I can't go back to sleep.

Not now.

Because I'm awake.

### *Excerpts from Session 2*

I saw *below* a corner today."

"Below?" asked Dr. Thaddius. "Within the floor?" He controlled the tone of his voice. He couldn't show fear, couldn't show weakness. That was what had nearly killed him the first time, thirty years ago — he'd given in to the fear. But not this time. He refused.

Gris pulled on his ears, then fingered the black electrical tape, as if checking to see if it was still secure. "Not below." He then pulled a piece of paper and a stub of charcoal from his smock's pocket and began to sketch. "Not below," he mumbled to himself as he drew something frantically across the paper. He then looked up and ran the charcoal across his left hand, scribbling something that to Dr. Thaddius looked like Sanskrit. Grinning and tossing the charcoal across the room, where it bounced from mirrors, he held the paper above his head, and stared up at it for several seconds. "Definitely *not below*." He then sat straight and lowered the piece of paper into his lap.

"If not below, then what?" asked Dr. Thaddius.

"It's obvious," said Gris, as he leaned forward and handed the paper to Thaddius. "I can see *through* corners."

Gris's hand was steady, as if it had been carved from a solid chunk of deeply stained maplewood. Dr. Thaddius's hand shook. Taking the paper and staring at it, all he saw was what looked like a random swirl of charcoal streaks. But after several seconds, he could see a pattern.

Meaning coalesced from chaos.

It was a drawing of Gris's living room, a room that was twisted, bent at odd angles, and turning back on itself until the floor and the ceiling merged together — but it was the room that Dr. Thaddius now found himself in. The drawing looked as if the room had been viewed from under water, simultaneously seen from multiple perspectives. In the center of the room sat two men. One was Juan Gris, but not the Juan Gris whom Dr. Thaddius now sat across from. This Juan Gris was young, his face smooth and his hair dark. There were no glasses, just black little eyes, piercing eyes that seemed to stare through the man who sat across from him.

Dr. Thaddius could not see the second man.

He was broken and torn — actually twisted — with his arms and legs bent at impossible angles. His face was built up of ragged slabs that were stitched together. Teeth that looked like shards of ice showed through transparent cheeks, while what remained of his left ear hung by a strip of bloody skin from the side of his neck. The eyelids were shut, but the eyes still saw, somehow turned around, able to look through the *back* of a shattered skull.

Dr. Thaddius reached up and touched his face.

The scars were no longer visible.

But within, deep within, where muscle had been ripped and bone shattered, he could still feel the damage, still feel where the glass had sliced through his face, still feel that place in the back of his skull that had splintered when it had bounced from the concrete.

He dropped the drawing.

The fear consumed him.

"How do you know me?"

He stared at Gris, trying to see into him, trying to see something behind his cataract-clouded eyes. He wanted to see what Juan Gris saw.

"I don't know you," said Gris while shaking his head. "What matters is that you know yourself. You can't hide. The past is here, in the present, superimposed on the future. All three are one. It's the nature of simultaneity. The math won't permit anything less."

Dr. Thaddius felt his head nod up and down.

What Gris said was true.

It was a fundamental truth — a truth greater than any understood in mere human terms.

*The math won't permit anything less.*

### *Personal Notes of Dr. Lyle Thaddius*

Juan Gris is a ghost.

He's my own personal ghost, summoned up from my past, come to haunt me, to reopen the old wounds, to try to throw me over the edge once again. I will not let him. I'm stronger now. It was thirty years ago when I last fought him — last fought myself. I was little more than a boy then, not strong enough to understand what I'd found, what I'd seen.

But I'm strong enough now.

I hope.

I pray.

I understood the nature of simultaneity.

It had become my life. But it was more than just the simultaneity of time, more than just the overlapping of past, present, and future that obsessed me. Space was also superimposed upon that mathematical landscape. Yesterday could become depth, tomorrow would flow into height. I had proven it mathematically. The equations demonstrated it. They showed a reality from a simultaneous, non-human perspective.

It was a perspective that only God could understand.

It was a perspective that the Cubist painters had *tried* to see.

It was pure math, lifeless, incapable of touching a human mind. But it had touched *my* mind. The math had shown me the Cubist perspective, a perspective not tainted by the human mind.

And that perspective nearly killed me.

And it is reaching out for me again — reaching out from thirty years in the past.

I have to find my old papers, my old thesis. This time the fight will be to the death. That much I understand. I'll have to remember all that I once knew to have any chance at all of surviving.

### *Excerpts from Session 3*

Gris stood back from the canvas. Red paint, looking like blood, ran down his brush, over his fist, and seemed to spurt from the wrinkles of his wrist.

"Still Life of a Pipe."

He took another step back.

"Can you see it?" he asked without turning around.

Dr. Thaddius didn't answer at first, but looked away from the painting and at the back of Gris's head, at those mirrored sunglasses. He watched his own eyes reflecting from the back of Gris's head.

"Not in yourself, beyond yourself, without yourself!" shouted Gris.

Dr. Thaddius's gaze jerked away from the back of Gris's head and returned to the painting. It showed a table, distorted and two-dimensional, having almost a dozen legs, none of which was quite touching a shattered black marble floor. And hovering above the table, seeming to rise beyond the plane of the canvas, floated a pipe. But it was only a phantom pipe, the outline of a pipe, the wood-grain surface of the table clearly seen through it. Yet, despite the pipe's ghostly presence, it cast a dead-black shadow against the tabletop.

Gris turned around.

"It both is and isn't there," whispered Dr. Thaddius.

"The pipe is a metaphor."

Dr. Thaddius knew that.

"It is you. Part of you is locked in the here and now, casting that black shadow in this world, while the real you, that part that holds your soul, that makes you human, hangs beyond this world, just a ghost, almost completely invisible to you."

"Why did you call me?" asked Dr. Thaddius. "What do you *really* want with me?"

"I didn't call you." He wiped at his nose with his paint-smeared hand, leaving a bloody-looking streak that dripped over his upper lip. "You called *me*, summoned me

up from your past."

Dr. Thaddius couldn't believe that, refused to believe that. He hadn't summoned this nightmare. He tried to sink through his stool, tried to dribble into the floor so that he could escape from this insanity.

He began to feel himself flow through the stool.

"You've summoned me, asked me to help you!" shouted Gris. He reached out his paint-stained hand.

It shifted and stretched, growing flat.

Dr. Thaddius tried to close his eyes. And he did close them, but found that he could still see, could see far more than he knew he could.

Gris's hand distorted, at first growing angular, the fingers turning to rectangular cubes of flesh, then rotating, the thumb and index finger vanishing as the skin turned to the texture of wood, then grew translucent, glistening like crystal.

"You can't let yourself forget."

Dr. Thaddius cried.

But the tears didn't run down his face.

They filled the *inside* of his head.

Dr. Thaddius felt himself drowning.

### *Personal Notes of Dr. Lyle Thaddius*

**J**uan Gris exists only within my own head.

I've come to accept that.

That much is easy to accept.

What is not so easy to accept is the realization that I no longer know what else may exist *only* within my own head. How much of my world is imagined, how much of it is not real? I have no way to measure, no way to judge. Once you question the smallest slice of reality, the rest unravels itself like some old sweater — you pull on a single dangling strand and soon a pile of yarn covers the floor.

I'm unraveling.

I may be imagining *all* of this.

But somehow, that doesn't make it any less real.

Not to me.

I found my old thesis.

I found my old medical records.

I can feel the scars beneath the face that the surgeons reconstructed. The scars are real. That I know. That is a fact. At least, I think that it is a fact.

I will not return to Juan Gris's home.

If I do, I will die.

### *Excerpts from Session 4*

**D**r. Thaddius stared out at the living room. He had *not* returned. It had come to *him*. Gris's house now sat on every street corner, and this living room was behind every door he opened. He could not avoid it, could not escape it. Dr. Thaddius now understood that he would have to face Gris.

And he would have to face himself.

The living room had grown, now covering acres. In the distance, at a horizon that was unnaturally close, the ceiling and floor melted together. He knew that all this space could not be contained within the house.

But that didn't disturb him.

Because he knew that this house, the living room, and Juan Gris existed only within his own head. And within his head was more than ample space for this nightmare. What really frightened Dr. Thaddius was realizing just how much space *was* in his head, just how *large* this

nightmare could grow. It could fill a world. It could fill a universe.

He once again thought about the equations, about *his* equations, that had filled a thesis thirty years ago. They showed how fragile reality could be, how formless it truly was. They showed how it could be changed.

"The Cubist artists were on the right track," said Gris.

Dr. Thaddius didn't even try to close his eyes. He knew there was little relationship between closed eyes and trying to block out the image of Juan Gris.

"Don't you agree?"

Gris moved nearer.

He still wore both pairs of glasses, but the sunglasses were no longer on the *back* of his head. At this moment, *back*, as a concept, no longer existed. It was not part of the universe that Dr. Thaddius had suddenly slipped into. Gris's head consisted only of *front*. The ketchup-bottle glasses sat in the center of his face, and to the left and right of those thick lenses were his ears, and beyond each of them, a mirrored lens from the sunglasses.

Dr. Thaddius didn't answer Gris.

He was too busy remembering.

This was happening as it had before.

Just as it had thirty years ago.

Just as it had when he'd been certain that the only way to get this nightmare out of his head was to *open* his head and let the nightmare escape.

He'd run through a plate-glass window — a window that had been on the third floor of the UCLA Computer Science Building. His skull was smashed when he hit the pavement below. But the doctors managed to put him back together.

They said that he'd had a complete breakdown, become so obsessed with his thesis, with a strange set of mathematical equations that no one else seemed capable of understanding, that he'd tried to kill himself.

He hadn't tried to kill himself.

He'd tried to save himself.

He'd tried to remain human.

"Did you hear me?" shouted Gris.

Dr. Thaddius looked up.

He thought it was *up*. It might have been *down*. It might have been *north*. It might have been *blue*. He felt something sizzle. The sizzling might have been *inside* his brain. It might have been *outside* his brain. He realized that it made absolutely no difference.

"Yes," he said. The words floated from his ears.

"The Cubists felt their way in an intuitive manner. They tried to see the world without the preconceptions that humanity carries. They tried to look at the world from God's perspective, seeing all sides simultaneously, all times simultaneously. But their vision was limited. They didn't have the mathematical tools that are at your disposal."

Dr. Thaddius reached out a hand.

He squinted his eyes and focused on Gris's *front only* head. He pulled down the concept of *depth* from somewhere distant, somewhere hidden. Gris's face bulged outward like an inflating balloon. His ears ran to the side of his face, and his sunglasses vanished *behind* his head.

Gris nodded his head.

"You do understand. The artist could only imagine that simultaneous perspective, but you can manipulate it, control it."



"No," whispered Dr. Thaddius.  
"There's no turning back now."

### *Personal Notes of Dr. Lyle Thaddius*

I don't know if this tape recorder is on. On implies knowledge of off. I have no knowledge of off. How can anything ever really be off? I don't know.

I did not leave Gris's house. I simply found myself not there.

The world is now a liquid place of sharp and contrasting angles. Behind every smile is a knife, behind every tear a shard of hate. I find myself walking streets that are paved with molten lead as I try to outrace the rainbow shafts of light that fill this landscape, trying to escape, trying to find a way out.

No.

Trying to find a way back.

*Back* is the key.

*Back* is both spatial and temporal. The two can merge, be viewed simultaneously, can interchange and become one and the same. *Back* is a place of mirrored sunglasses, showing me where I've been, where I will go. Yesterday is nothing more than a step back. That may be my salvation.

### *Excerpts from Session 5*

"They put you back together," said Gris. "They reset the broken bones, dropped a steel plate in the back of your head, and sewed your face back together. They said you were as good as new."

Dr. Thaddius didn't try to focus his eyes.

He knew that it was pointless.

There was nothing to focus on.

Gris's living room was a spinning collage of paintings and mirrors. He saw everything, simultaneously, from all perspectives. He saw it, but his brain could not interpret it. He saw more than his brain had ever been designed to accept. He had once believed that he could master the equations that defined reality.

But they had mastered him.

"But you weren't," said Gris, his voice echoing from the mirrored maelstrom. "After you discovered the math, understood that it was possible to manipulate reality, you found that knowledge crushing, almost killing. You then hid from yourself, hid from the equations, and started on the path that would make you Dr. Lyle Thaddius, the good doctor who would help so many discover themselves, discover those secrets hidden deep within themselves."

Dr. Thaddius knew that there was only one way out.

Only one way to cope.

He tried to stand.

But standing implied knowledge of up and down, the relationship between floor and feet. It was there, buried somewhere in the torrent of information that now flooded over him, but he couldn't see it, couldn't pull it out.

He had waited too long.

He was too lost.

Even death was now beyond his grasp.

"But you couldn't rediscover yourself, hiding in your new world. For thirty years you couldn't find yourself. But the equations were still with you, chewing at you from the inside, making your existence something hollow and lifeless. You knew that, understood that you were not really alive, so you called on me, wanting me to help show you the way back."

"There is no returning!"

Out of the swirl of mirrors and rainbows a face materialized. It was Juan Gris's, but he no longer wore his ketchup-bottle glasses. The mirrored sunglasses seemed to fill his face. Dr. Thaddius stared at them, but saw nothing. They were filled with a light-sucking blackness.

"Thirty years ago you lost yourself, lost your way. Instead of pursuing the math, understanding what it was that you'd discovered, you ran and hid, building a life that was dead and empty. But you can go *back*, can touch that place again and choose the path that you didn't take."

"And become not human!"

The fear smothered Dr. Thaddius. He remembered what he'd seen when waking after the doctors had put him back together. He'd opened his eyes and seen a world that had never existed before, a world that no eyes had ever seen before.

He'd no longer been human.

"No," said Gris. "The essence of being human is to accept change, to seek it, to throw yourself into it. You know that, and you want that. That's why you've called me. I can show you how to go *back*. I can give you what you want."

*Back.*

Dr. Thaddius remembered the hospital room.

It had been all angles and colors, a collage of shapes with no meaning — with no substance. And he'd rejected it, bolted from it like a frightened animal.

*Like an animal.*

*Not a human.*

He felt himself stand.

His feet touched a floor that wasn't there.

"Simultaneity is the key," said Gris. "To move *back* in time, you merely have to move *back* in space. You've known this for thirty years. You could have returned whenever you wanted."

"I was frightened!"

"Yes!" screamed Gris. "You saw a world that no human had ever seen before, and you were frightened by it. The perspective was alien, but the emotions still human. Emotion will remain with you; it is something that you will not lose. Fear will give way to curiosity and curiosity to wonder. *Those* are the things that make you human, and those are the things that you have not felt for the past thirty years. To walk *back*, to return to that place, will save you. To go *back* will make you human once more."

Dr. Thaddius felt his feet slide backwards.

Mirrors and paintings exploded, paint and glass vaporizing.

"To be human," said Dr. Thaddius.

"To be human," said Juan Gris.

Everything vanished, eaten by darkness. Only one thing remained. The mirrored sunglasses floated in front of Dr. Thaddius.

He jumped into them.

Jumped backwards.

### *Yesterday/Today/Tomorrow*

Lyle."

Something behind his closed eyelids moved.

"Lyle Thaddius!"

His eyes opened.

She hovered over him. Her hair burned, sizzling with electric discharges. Her face was a cracked pane of stained

glass, her mouth a black slash, her nose sliding down her throat, and her eyes slowly floating across her forehead.

Lyle didn't run, didn't hide.

Fear beat at him, tried to smother him.

But he fought it.

He focused.

He reached out a hand, passing it *through* her face. He could feel her thoughts, feel the concern, feel the compassion. Her thoughts, all blue and green, *smiled* at him, *caressed* him.

Curiosity filled him.

He removed his hand.

But then quickly reached out again, *without* actually moving. He touched her.

Her face shimmered. The angles softened and the bright colors dulled. Her eyes stopped floating across her

forehead, her nose crawled to the center of her face, and her mouth turned into a smile, a smile full of white teeth.

Wonder filled Lyle Thaddius.

Again he raised his hand. It was flesh and bone. Again he focused. It shimmered and shifted. It inverted. It was now bone-covered flesh. He relaxed his eyes and his hand inverted back.

He controlled the math.

It no longer controlled him.

"We thought we'd lost you," said the nurse. "The surgeons said that it was a close thing, that for a while it didn't look as if you were going to make it."

"I made it *back*," whispered Lyle.

"You certainly did," she said. □

# Fear

(Continued from Page 5)

he was alone because he was crippled and could not hunt ("the extra mouth to feed," David's words echoed in her mind), and he had hinted darkly that the others would not be friendly.

They came on the fifth day. They were silent and terribly fast, appearing just at twilight as Bridget started back for supper. The leaves did not crackle under their feet, and the first sounds she heard were a sickening thwack and Shay's yelp of pain. She turned as they were upon her and saw blood on Shay's face, made more grotesque by rage and panic. He tried to wrest her from them but was driven off with stones that thudded with a rustle into the bracken after hitting him. She drew breath to shriek and inhaled only the stench of the hairy hand that clamped over her mouth and nose. She had never passed out before; she struggled violently against it, with bursting lungs, until the glittering blackness filled her mind and she couldn't see Shay anymore.

Bridget had never before felt anything like the cold terror that filled her when she came to. She told herself that these short, ragged men were troupng fairies, friendly folk who wanted perhaps to swap a fairy baby for a real one. But their hands were too rough, their voices too harsh, and they had tied her up as if she were a bag of mending. She was carried through the forest, through darkness so complete that she wondered if she'd really woken up. After a while — perhaps a hundred precious breaths — a flickering light began to grow, and she heard voices. She was dropped to the ground, dragged past a huge, scorching fire, and left in a damp stone structure. A man stationed himself at the opening; in the firelight, his white hair and pale eyes made her cringe.

Shay had not followed them. By dawn, that realization ached inside her almost as much as her need for Mam. But she looked up from her misery and saw that the guard had gone, and she was able to roll herself to the opening and look out.

There were eleven other huts, no two alike, standing

in a ring around the hole where the fire burned. Near it, animals picked and grazed and several tiny children played.

She found that someone had left her some food, but she was sick after she ate it. Her retching drew a group of silver women to hover over her, and she felt comforted when they stroked her hair and cooed over its red color.

"Are you banshees?" she asked in Irish. They drew back in surprise at these first words from her. One of them, apparently the youngest though they were all wizened and hollow-eyed, offered her a carved bowl of water and sat before her as she drank.

"We are not banshees," she said slowly, as if sensing Bridget's newness to their tongue. "I am Mora. Are you of the Tuatha?"

Bridget thought about the legend of the Tuatha and said she didn't know. "Bridget is my name."

This elicited a solemn nod. "They said you would return and take the land one day."

Bridget remembered what her mother had said and stared at the wrinkled, pale face before her. She thought desperately of something to say with her small store of words that would show she was a friend; then she remembered her leprechaun swatch, and reached out with her bound hands to tug at the woman's rags. "Mora, I can fix these," she said, and managed to draw the small needle from its sheath in her pocket. Mora's eyes grew wide at the sight of the gleaming stainless steel, and she watched in fascination as Bridget unraveled a long strand from her embroidery and threaded the needle deftly, barely hampered by her bonds. "Look," Bridget said, and stitched up the largest hole in Mora's tunic as neatly as she could. "See? Better." Some of Mora's clothes were woven, but some were of a solid cloth Bridget had never seen before, fastened with large, rough thongs. Bridget's whipstitching looked delicate and sophisticated by comparison, and to her relief, Mora smiled broadly.

Bridget spent the rest of the day with the women, who told her that the men were out hunting. She learned to milk a goat and to tell time from a stone's shadow. Mora had an ancient, crack-faced watch, and Bridget wound it for her, as amazed that they had forgotten this simple thing as they were that she did not know what animal skin was.

When the men returned, Mora told her she was to see the priest-king. Frightened, she struggled a bit as she was

brought to the largest hut, this one made of blocks of earth with a woven grass roof, and she sat trembling by its cold fire hole, looking at the priest-king. He was almost bald, with one green eye and one milky blue one, and a great mauve splotch over half his face. He leaned down and untied Bridget's chafed wrists, then sat and kindled a fire, filling the room with a pleasant, turfy smoke.

"My daughter tells me you are a mender," he said quietly.

Shy and intimidated, though no longer shaking, Bridget looked down. "I want to help. Don't hurt me."

He did not answer, but his craggy, discolored face was somehow both grave and merry. "Do you know what a *seanchai* is?" he asked then, in English.

"A storyteller," she answered.

"And more than that, as well. The books were all burned for fuel long ago, in the cold time; the *seanchai* remembers all the stories and all the history, and recites them so the people will know their past. There are tales of the *Tuatha Dé Danann*, gods who went into the earth thousands of years ago; there are many who think that is who you are, but more who say your people have arisen from the earth not as gods but as our true enemies who cursed and abandoned us." He seemed to see that she could not follow even his English, and frowned with the effort of simplification. "We mean you no harm, but we do not know your people. We took you out of fear that they would attack us, from similar ignorance. If you truly want to help, you will go home tomorrow and give your people a message of peace from us. It is very important and you will have to learn a lot of words, just like a *seanchai*. Will you do that?"

Bridget nodded, the responsibility making her solemn. He left her then so she could sleep. There was no guard, and her hands were free; she curled up against the room's emptiness and the embers' unearthly glow, and thought hard about peace and Mam and the caps and what was real and what were stories, until at last she fell asleep.

Shay came for her that night. She woke to feel him bundling the furs around her and carrying her to the window. The fire pit was full of ashes, and from far away came the sound of many voices arguing. She tried to struggle as Shay lifted her out to the ground and jumped down beside her, but she was half-asleep, and by the time she untangled herself from the covers he had half carried, half dragged her well out of sight of the ring of houses. "Shay, let me down," she protested. He let her stand but would not let her go. "I don't want to leave now."

Shay shook his head and jumped up and down, as he had when they first met. He said that she was just a trading thing, that they had taken her to buy safety, that they would kill her if her people tried to take away the land.

"No, Shay, that won't happen now, not if I go back," she said, but he would not be convinced, and he began to walk her in the direction of the caps.

It did not occur to her to run away from him. She tried to turn several times, but Shay would have none of it, and soon she was lost in the black, moonless woods and had no choice but to follow him. What would the priest-king say, she wondered miserably, when he found that she had abandoned them? Would there be another terrible war? If there was, it would be all her fault, and she began to cry

as they walked. Shay patted her a little but would not stop, though they were both exhausted and ill-shod. She stumbled in the mud and bracken and began to shiver as her clothes were wet through by water shaken from the saplings as they passed. Strange animal noises made her hang nervously on Shay's arm, not sure he was strong enough to protect her. He couldn't walk that way, so he disengaged her clutching fingers and made her walk behind him. This small rejection brought a fresh flood of tears that lasted many steps, but when she was all cried out and trudging blind and numb behind Shay's rhythmic limp, it came to her in a flash of light that of course, she could give the peace message anyway, in her own words. It was going to be all right, she thought, and a spring crept into her step.

They emerged from the woods as dawn seeped redly into the eastern clouds. The shelters looked large and smooth and clean now to Bridget, compared with where she'd been. She took a deep breath and started toward them, but Shay hung back, shaking his head. "It's all right," she told him. "I'll tell them you're my friend..." But he would not listen, and she finally let go of his hand, saying a reluctant good-bye-and-thanks as he turned.

There was a shout from the shelter behind her and the flash of an energy weapon; Bridget screamed as Shay fell, stunned, and her father came running out to grab her up roughly in his arms. "It's all right now, Bridget, we got the little bastard."

Torn between the love in his first words and the cruelty in the rest, Bridget froze for a moment, then clawed her way free to bounce on the springy turf into her mother's arms, at the same time pulling toward Shay, who was already manacled by Mr. Hanlon. "Stop it!" she cried helplessly, grasping at Shay's coarse tunic. "Mam, make them stop it!"

"We've found her, Fitzhugh," Father said as the cap leader joined them. "And Jamie here has located their camp; we can attack in an hour, before they have a chance at the other children."

Mr. Fitzhugh made a sign at Mr. Hanlon, and Shay was released to tumble at Bridget's feet. She crouched down next to him and watched Mr. Fitzhugh turn toward her father.

"Looks more to me like she found you."

"Ah, she's not light; she'd brought us a hostage, I'd say, and we'd be stone mad to let the chance slip by."

Bridget tried to object, but her mother shushed her, though her own hands were tense with anger on Bridget's shoulders.

"I didn't want to live up here, but now that I have to I'm damned if I'll live in fear," her father finished.

"But they're afraid of you!" Bridget burst out, and at last Mr. Fitzhugh turned to her.

"Let's hear from wee Bridget before we go off half-cocked," he said, and looked down at her.

"This is Shay," she explained quickly, desperately. "He's my friend, I met him on ascension day, he wouldn't hurt anyone. The *clann* took me away because they were afraid you would try to take the land away again like in the old times. But they're good people and they were nice to me. I can speak to them — Mam, they speak Irish — and the priest-king told me to bring you a peace message, but —"

"Catholics," Mr. Hanlon spat the word into the turf. "I'd

figured as much. Macdonald, let's go —"

"You will not." Bridget's mother stood up slowly, and something in her face made the others fall silent. "David Macdonald, the concern I've seen in you for our daughter has made me wonder if we've quarreled for nothing all these years. But you will not start this hell on earth all over again. Did we spend five generations in a hole in the ground for nothing? During the Troubles they used little bombs: have we not seen what the big ones do that we must start it all again?"

"No one's talking about bombs, Mary," said Father uncomfortably, but more gently than Bridget had ever heard him speak to her.

"Mrs. Macdonald has a point," said Mr. Fitzhugh. "I say we go to them, respond to their peace offer, maybe even learn —"

Mr. Hanlon swore. "Walk right into their trap."

"It's been many years since we had soldiers, Jamie. It suits us badly now. We're the foreigners up here." Mr. Fitzhugh scratched his beard and turned to the crowd that had gathered. "Everyone here should get back to work. I'll leave in an hour to take Bridget to Shay's people, try to make some sort of agreement."

The crowd erupted into loud debate, but Bridget wasn't listening. She helped Shay out of the metal cuffs and to his feet, then told him in Irish that he had a home with her if his people wouldn't take him back. He nodded and grinned his awful grin, and they turned together to Mr. Fitzhugh.

For that day, at least, there was no fighting, and Bridget refused to be afraid even when her mother warned her not to hope too hard, that people were difficult and sometimes did not keep their promises. That night in her own cot, after hours of more talking than she had done in a lifetime, Bridget listened to the patter of real rain on the shelter roof. "You believed in legends, and you became one yourself, my wee changeling," her mother said as she fixed the blankets around her. "I lost a human baby and had a fairy girl returned to me." Through the window, Bridget watched the streaks of rain weave into gleaming pools on the ground and hoped there would be a rainbow in the morning. In her mind she traced a droplet's path back up into the sky, above which even her imagination could not go. □

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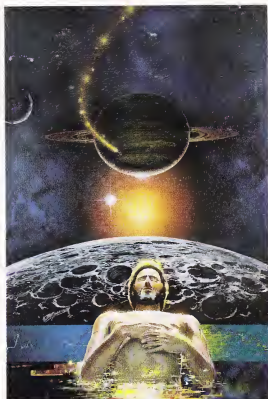
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